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The Idea of the Public Library in the United States: Why is it Important?

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The Idea of the Public Library in the United States: Why is it Important?

by

Ruth Bernstein

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO PITZER COLLEGE
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Introduction

Overview

In a 1954 Library Science textbook author Ernestine Rose asked her readers to ponder whether the public library is either “unique and indispensable “ or “incidental and pleasant—the frills on our civic costume” (8). Over sixty-five years later these opposite constructs are still valid to frame my thesis with the questions, What is important about a library, What does it mean and to whom does it matter?

Librarian Don Borchert stated that the library is, “an idea more than anything else, and it is an idea that is impossible to swallow in one or two bites” (2007: xiv). The thought of a public library as an idea gave me a fresh perspective on an institution I have belonged to for decades. A library is not just a building or a place where a collective of books and digital information are catalogued. It is not just a building in which a person could walk in and make oneself comfortable in any city or neighborhood in which it exists. It is not just a place for a community to meet, to vote, to take classes, or to simply come in out of the rain. This combination of possible elements is why the public library in the United States is a useful location to examine how it is collectively paid for and spoken about, jointly valued, destroyed and protected, and how this amalgamation can impart a lesson about what it means to be a part of American society in 2011.

A Note on My Position

The time in which this thesis was written, and my background as a researcher, gives a sense of the tension between books and digital information. I was born in 1969. I am a part of the generation of Americans that did not grow up with cell phones, cable television, or the Internet. As a child I did not learn about computers in school and it was more science fiction than reality to think of a personal computer in one's home—much less a laptop, iPhone or social networking account. Reflecting my own experience librarian Don Borchert recalls, "I had never used the internet until I began working at the library. I was one of those people on a historic cusp; we didn't learn it in school, my folks didn't have it at home, and there didn't seem to be any reason to try a thing I had done without my entire life" (2007: 35). When I started this study I admit to having strong preconceptions that the way I remembered the library was better since I not only revere and collect books but also work in an independent bookstore. To those of us who have spent half our lives in the pre-computer era the engraved stone over one entrance to the Central branch of the Los Angeles Public Library that reads, "In the world of affairs we live in our own age. In books we live in all ages" truly meant *books*.

I started this study with the underlying belief that if books go away in favor of digitalized information then something profound will be lost. Nicolson Baker called the time period around the mid-1990's "the end of the Age of Paper" (Baker 1996: 50). Neatly sharing my early stance, a librarian blog called *Lesbrariand*

referred to a 2010 *New York Times* article that revealed homework struggles high school students are thought to feel when they are asked to read a book:

The article discusses the impact of contemporary technologies (texting, social networking, YouTube) on students and their study habits... the jaw-dropping part came near the very beginning, when a high school student explains why he can't seem to finish Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle*: On YouTube, "you can get a whole story in six minutes," he explains. "A book takes so long. I prefer the immediate gratification."

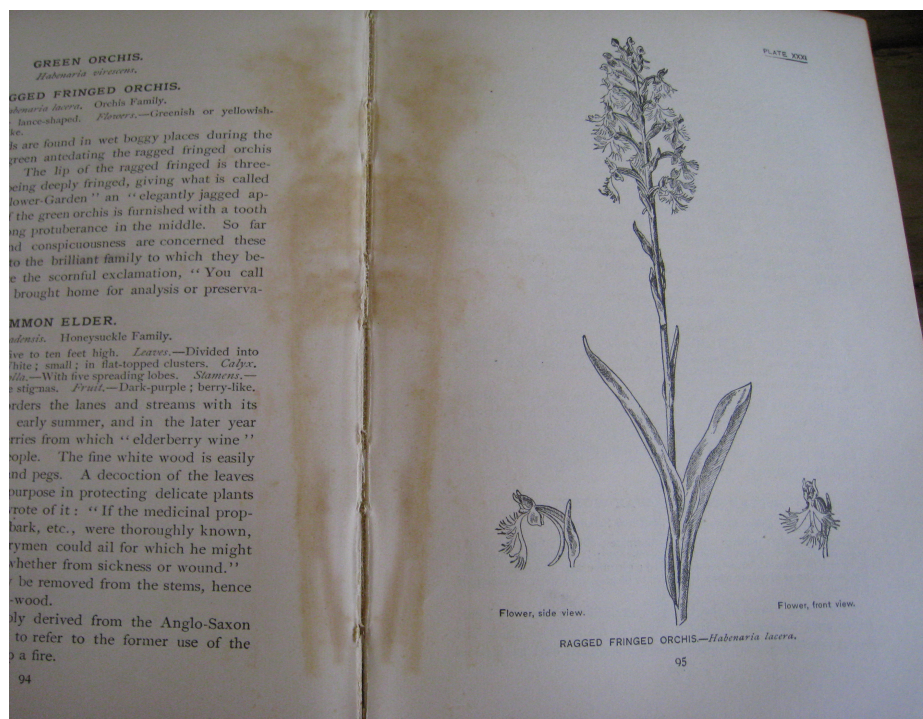
You little *twerp*.

What is so special about a book? I asked this question of my well-read and computer savvy husband and he replied that reading a book is different from reading on a computer because, "online you do all sorts of things like pay bills...the book is intimate, it has a sole purpose, it is just you and the book." Bibliophiles talk with varying degrees of snobbery about the value in different editions, weights of paper, lusciousness of certain printing techniques, and types of binding or edge finishing such as gold leaf or marbling. A shelf of books can be thought to imply a well-rounded person, illustrated by a quote from British interior designer Terrance Conran who said, "whenever television program-makers want to suggest that the subject they are filming is intelligent, they film the person against a background of books" (1994: 155). Once in the bookstore where I work a realtor raced in, threw down a credit card, and asked for "six feet of art books" to be brought to her waiting car before she showed a house. To Conran using books as "filler" may be thought of as, "morally reprehensible" but it is understandable since, "books have always been valued for their beauty" (1994: 155).

Part of the appeal is the form and artwork publishers choose. A large oblong photography book called *After the Flood* by Robert Polidori is filled with superb full-page color images and at over ten pounds, an observer either must sit down with it on one's lap, or set it down and hover over, taking in the powerful details. I own a tiny red leather book from the 1920's called *The Stories of One Hundred Operas* with miniscule printing and sheer pages meant for easily slipping in an evening clutch or jacket pocket and consulting on the sly for details of the piece. The look of the dust jacket or front cover is considered important to some. Jennifer, a screenwriter in her mid-twenties, recalled buying a second copy of a title she already owned, but didn't like the photo on the front, because in her collection of books, "I have to be able to look at the cover." The look and feel of paper is a noteworthy as an interviewee said she is "obsessed with the smell of paper" and also thought that "maybe kids being born now having no real emotional attachment to a book they won't have the same sense memory of holding a book."

Appreciating the form of books may have to do with a personal connection to the author or to other readers. I collect books that are signed by writers that I admire like Haruki Murakami who uses a lovely blue stamp of a flower petal and then writes his first name in wild loopy letters. Or William Faulkner's signature, tiny and from what looks like a fountain pen, on my grandmother's first edition of *The Reivers*. At one brief moment these books were touched by their authors, which provides a feeling of connectivity. One interviewee said if, "there is a book that I really love, it is nice to know that maybe other people loved it too." The charm of realizing that one is sharing a book with others happened to me when I opened a

Victorian era library book called *How to Know the Wild Flowers* and found the purplish brown faded outline of a plant that was pressed at some point in the past one hundred years.



Pages 94-5 of *How to Know the Wild Flowers* (1898) by Mrs. William Starr Dana
Photo by author

Proof of sharing a book with others exists in finding what is known as marginalia, writing on the page, or the “literary archaeology” that “has an uncertain fate in a digitalized world” (Johnson “Book Lovers Fear Dim Future for Notes in the Margins” 2011). Studs Terkel, the American oral historian, called marginalia a “raucous conversation” and was not pleased when a book he lent to a friend was returned to him without new writing on the pages (Johnson “Book Lovers Fear Dim Future for Notes in the Margins” 2011). A well-known example is in a 1977 copy of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* that Nelson Mandela had in prison. Mandela wrote his

name next to the passage that reads, “Cowards die many times before their deaths” leaving a clue of his resolve in a historically significant period (Johnson “Book Lovers Fear Dim Future for Notes in the Margins” 2011). U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins explains the way writing in a book can affect the life of another. The final passage of the poem, called “Marginalia,” follows:

Yet the one I think of most often,
 the one that dangles from me like a locket,
 was written in the copy of *Catcher in the Rye*
 I borrowed from the local library
 one slow, hot summer.
 I was just beginning high school then,
 reading books on a davenport in my parents' living room,
 and I cannot tell you
 how vastly my loneliness was deepened,
 how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed,
 when I found on one page
 A few greasy looking smears
 and next to them, written in soft pencil-
 by a beautiful girl, I could tell,
 whom I would never meet-
 ‘Pardon the egg salad stains, but I’m in love.’ (Collins 2001: 94-5)

Possibly the delight of marginalia, or the importance, is that an individual makes some unique difference in a mass produced product and another person reading, a solitary act, senses it. Many people have a deep dislike of marginalia as it is thought to devalue a book but it is undeniably direct and more often than not, mysterious. Once I spilled a couple of big drops of coffee on a library book and on the advice of a thoughtful friend I circled the stain in pencil and wrote the date and “Sumatra Blend.” In a public library one knows they are sharing a book with strangers and some connection can be felt even if a grocery list doesn’t fall out or a scribble of writing is discovered.

The feeling of intimacy can extend to a stranger that shares a perceived love of books. Celia, a social media coordinator, who collects books and also uses a digital reading device, feels a connection to a librarian because she thinks he is a “sweet good man” that is “there because he loves the books. So I feel good about him.” Since I have spent time in the same branch Celia attends I happen to know of the man she speaks. He has grey hair, wears thick bi-focal glasses and handles the books in a gentle manner, is exceedingly polite, and soft-spoken which practically defines the stereotype of an American librarian. He may not love the books but what is inherent in Celia’s quote is a belief about a person associated with something she venerates.

My nostalgia for books as an important element of a library affected my role as a researcher, at least early on. I include these reflections because in this thesis there is an ongoing undercurrent about how a library is perceived by many as a place for books. The current time period is one in which books are being phased out of the collections of public and collegiate universities across the country. Nicolson Baker wrote an article in the *New Yorker* magazine about how the San Francisco Library (SFPL) has sent, “by a conservative estimate two hundred thousand books to landfills—many of them old, hard to find, out of print, and valuable” (1996: 51). In fairness some books become worn out with heavy use or age and a process called “weeding” occurs. A librarian tipped off Baker that something different from weeding was occurring and that he could inspect the card catalog in order to compare it to the online catalog to prove the loss. The head librarian, Kenneth E. Dowlin, denied Baker access. Based on Baker’s belief that the catalog was public record he sued for access, and won. Baker explained in a *New Yorker* article that the

inspiration for legal maneuvering came in part from the letterhead that Dowlin used to deny his request, which is printed with the SFPL logo: “Access, Discover, Empower” (1996: 50).

Upon inspecting the records for a month, Baker reports that he realized the story was really not about the preservation of a paper system but what happens when, “telecommunications enthusiasts take over big old research libraries and attempt to remake them, with corporate help, as high traffic show-places for information technology” (1996: 50). In 1992 SFPL signed a “multi million dollar lease agreement with [telecommunications company] Digital Equipment” to launch the on-line catalogue” (Baker 1996: 57). The opportunity to think about how books are still valued is shown when Baker spoke with a number of librarians who sense that they should protect them:

When asked to sort books in their departments into those that had circulated within the past two years and those that had not, they did not sort. When asked to weed, they have not weeded. A branch librarian wrote me that she sometimes goes around with a due-date stamp, furtively stamping into currency books that she feels are imperiled. Employees have saved thousands of books on the sly, quietly transferring them from one department to another, and hiding them in their lockers. They reintroduce these books when the danger has passed. They call it ‘guerrilla librarianship’ (1996: 58).

The *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote an article exposing the issue, which is thought to have stopped. The library now tries to donate or sell the books, a practice typical to most large systems.

The cusp period between books and digital archiving extends not just to people around my age and older. Jennifer, in her mid-twenties, states that people are in libraries for, “at least I hope, the legitimate reason of checking out books.” I asked her to reiterate that checking out a book is the most legitimate reason for

going to a library. She stated, “I think it is. I think that is the point of a lending library.” Of course, not everyone agrees exactly about what a library’s role is in a society. A pre-digital age quote, “The form of the record makes no difference whatsoever,” is from a book called *The Library of Tomorrow* published in 1939 (Sapp 2002: xx). The reference is to how librarians, as early as 1937 according to the source, “were beginning to cheat a little with reproductions of pictures and phonograph records” but the library would remain “a repository of records of what human beings had learned, and thought, and dreamed” (Sapp 2002: xx).

According to my research into library and librarian history access to information remains the public library’s main function. My question posed to interviewees, “What does the library mean?” was answered with key words like: “free information” “education” “welcoming place” and “[it] belongs to every citizen.” Librarian Scott Douglas said, “I began to see that librarians would change, technologies would change, even patrons would change, but the role of the library as the gateway to something greater would always stay the same” (2008: 13). In this thesis I define the public library as a “gateway to something greater” by showing that although I remained book-loyal in my early research, the public library continues to promise free access to information—which is considered an important function of a democracy for communities, citizens and voters in the United States.

Methodology

The 160-year-old American free public library system is a vast subject that has been analyzed, reported about and regarded in an enormous amount of printed

or recorded information. Throughout a typical day I very easily came across photographs, conversations, or articles on the public library, and I could leave my desk and be inside a branch in ten minutes. One late night, a month from the final deadline of this thesis, I saved and closed my working draft and clicked on the *New York Times* website to take a look at what was happening in the world only to immediately see a new headline about libraries—“Publisher Limits Shelf Life for Library E-Book.” Digging up material was not my problem. My strategy was to note everything I heard and read for potential follow up even if it was just a quick copy and paste of a website or a notation of a conversation or book. I sought to record and analyze the way the free public library is described by patrons, librarians, journalists, and other authors to help define the idea behind an American institution. In the design of my methodology I incorporated blogs, interviews, books, journal entries, radio programs, newspapers, websites, readers’ comments from articles, and my own observations from different branches and a rally.

Public libraries and librarians typically inspire lofty praise and support to the point that it was a challenge to find an undercurrent of critical disagreement and debate. Even op-ed pieces *against* library funding stated that the free public library is a vital and beloved institution. Librarian blogs and the accompanying reader responses gave my research a much-needed tilt away from the cheerleading model. A policy fellow at the Center for Democracy and Technology stated about blogs, “I hear America typing¹...that busy hum may turn out to be our best hope for free speech” (Dobija 2007: 53).

¹ A reference to Walt Whitman’s famous poem, “I Hear America Singing”

The blogosphere, or bibliogosphere as some librarians call it, “constitutes a wider-reaching and more diverse group” since keeping a personal diary, was once considered a hobby for “a privileged few” (O’Sullivan 2005: 65). Todd Levin of Salon.com states that the popularity of blogging is supported by the starting conditions of a “level ground for publishing” because “all you need is a healthy obsession and a modest amount of disk space on someone’s server” (O’Sullivan 2005: 65). Another thought is that a blog is simply not a diary because it is a public rather than a private record. Author Catherine O’Sullivan counters that by stating, “today’s online diarist have the ability to restrict anyone from reading their diaries if they so choose” (2005: 68). O’Sullivan finds blogs to be “like their pen-and-paper predecessors” but to “serve multiple purposes and, thus, reflect many facets of life in a particular time and place. They reveal the effect technology has had on the diarist’s sense of self (construction and representation) in the computer age” (2005: 69). In anthropologist Annette Markham’s ethnographic study *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space* she states, “online communication does seem quite extraordinary. By logging onto my computer, I (or part of me) can seem to (or perhaps actually) exist separately from my body in “places” formed by the exchange of messages...” (1998: 17).

The sheer number of blogs by librarians was astounding to me. Author Marilyn Johnson states, “library science has always been a discreet profession. Have you ever had a librarian confide her pain or personal heartache while on the job? Not likely” (2010: 49). Johnson believed librarians to be “the last people I’d expect to make noise on a social network” but they “took to blogging with a vengeance”

(2010: 50). Johnson includes a chapter in her book, *This Book Is Overdue! How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All*, called “The Blog People” that solely covers this activity. She states that the “stampede to blogging had an impact” because there are around 150,000 librarians in the United States. Johnson claims that because librarians “traditionally supported and celebrated” uncensored “free expression” blogs are a natural fit (2010: 51). Carefully reading dozens of blogs, and skimming many multiples of that number, I found the entries to form a very valuable part of my research. The feeling I got when reading the array of librarian blogs supplied me with a greater depth about librarianship because each site had a notable degree of thoughtfulness, well-written presentation and plenty of readers’ comments that sometimes sprouted another separate “conversation.” I came away with the feeling that librarian bloggers work earnestly at keeping up a strong network for sharing information about strategy, technology advancement or political commentary. Public libraries are places for professionalism and polite employee restraint. The feeling of venting frustrations, both playful and serious, is a notable thread throughout the blogs I examined.

In all blogs and reader’s comments I left the original type as it appeared including misspellings and capitalization. I tended to reproduce the posts on the long side in order to give readers a feeling for the length and thoughtfulness of the flow of words. To back up this decision I consulted Markham’s *Life Online* for her format and style choice relating to how blogs and online chatting were cited in her 1998 work.

Blogs offer ethnographic data about job concerns, community issues, shared ideas, and humorous recounting of experience. Many blogs I read restrict the comments to reviews of books or a combination of library information and another hobby like cooking or travel. Anonymous blogs are approximated at around 18%, based on an unfinished study cited in a *Library Journal* editorial, with the most likely reason given as job protection: “in a field that fights for free expression but sometimes finds that it’s hard to practice within the confines of a library job” (Fialkoff 2008). Anonymity in blogging “shows us the American id in all its snaggletoothed, pustulent[sic] glory, with a transparency that didn’t exist before the Internet. And in its rather twisted way, that’s a public service” (Seitz 2010). In my research anonymous librarian blogs are often the site of intense discussion of three subjects: personal information², complaints about patrons/administration³, and political sniping.⁴

² *Feel Good Librarian*: In a post about a long unexplained absence reveals that her thyroid cancer had come out of remission: “The body scan after last treatment was clear; bloodwork in six months and another scan next fall.” There were 22 responses of encouragement from readers.

³ *The Society For Librarians Who Say Motherfucker*: “Being bitchy and informing me that you are neither ‘retarded nor hard of hearing’ is a douche thing to do” and “The mofo’s cry of “I’ll never come to this library again!” is music to my ears.” *Librarian Avenger* post called “Why You Should Get Down on Your Hands and Knees and Thank a Librarian”: “Librarians rule...and they will kick the crap out of anyone who says otherwise...With a flip of the wrist they can hide your dissertation behind of old Field and Stream magazines.”

⁴ *Annoyed Librarian*: By all means lobby for fair funding and show the importance of libraries, especially at the state and local level, but acting like library funding should never be cut regardless of the budget situation, or that cutting library funding in the face of a budget crisis is some sort of betrayal, is misguided at best. Librarians should be more critical and intelligent than that, and quit pretending that what’s best for libraries is always best for the country...If the choice ever came down to Social Security or Medicare or defense and libraries, everyone but librarians would choose one or more of the former every time...Libraries have never been a basic social service of the federal government.

A notable and popular⁵ anonymous blogger I quote in this thesis is called the *Annoyed Librarian*, whose tagline is: “Whatever it is, I’m against it.” *Library Journal* hosts *The Annoyed Librarian* and the editors, according to Marilyn Johnson, claim to “negotiate with her (or him) through lawyers” (2010: 61). Dissent against anonymity of blogging is strong. The non-anonymous *Free Range Librarian*, written by Karen Schneider, states that the *Annoying Librarian* takes a, “convenient, lazy perch, particularly when you do it behind the lack of accountability that anonymity provides” (2010). A *Library Journal* editorial defends *Annoyed Librarian* because “she” can “facilitate conversation—and controversy” but just as important the high web hits “count in our for-profit world, as they do in your nonprofit one” (Fialkoff 2008). The use of both named and unnamed blogs broadened my mind as to the way public libraries exist as a site for employment.

I interviewed six people—four patrons, a librarian, and a literacy volunteer coordinator. The four patrons, three women and one man, range in age from 25-50. I asked these people, all acquaintances of mine, for interviews because I knew they use the library on a regular basis. They were also chosen for the range in age they represent and the fact that they all grew up in different parts of the United States. I used a semi-structured format in each patron interview with the same basic questions but made sure there was plenty of time to branch out if something of interest was expressed. The library employees were asked more pointed questions about their jobs and what issues arise as a public servant.

⁵ Based on the amount of times *Annoyed Librarian* is recommended or referred to by other bloggers on their own pages.

Throughout the time I was compiling my research I ended up casually chatting with people and the subject of the library would either come up or occasionally I would bring it up. These exchanges never became formal interviews but they did give me a sense of the way the library is thought about, used, or not used. I asked one person, a man I work with in his late 40's, if he ever went to the library. He playfully hit my shoulder as he stated in an exasperated voice, "Nooo, I work in a bookstore!" Later he mentioned, "I would love to be able to go someday. I take books out for so long I don't want to have to bring them back. I don't have time." An elderly lady came in the bookstore and while I rang up her purchase she mentioned that she started going to libraries again when the store where I work stopped offering a 10% discount we offered to members of a local public radio station. She enjoyed "rediscovering the public library" and thinks it is an "important part of our society." The store has reinstalled the discount and now she combines both the independent bookstore and library in her monthly errands.

In interviews I left in longer passages of speech as I appreciate the manner of speaking that each interviewee provided. Pauses are denoted by "... " and words spoken louder are denoted by capitalization. Pseudonyms were used in all interviews with one exception. I met a woman about to graduate with her Library Science Masters Degree and I quote her from our short interview but I also include quotes from her blog in which she gives her full name. In reader's comments I include the name posted by the writer because they may be using a pseudonym of their own choosing and the comments were on public sites.

I am a patron of the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) and I pick up or drop off books and use their database at least once a week. My methodology relied heavily on the words of others but my experience as a visitor also made an important impression on my analysis. I have been a volunteer in the Adult Literacy Program and have paid attention to the way this program connects students to their tutors and what is expected of both of them. At a variety of neighborhood branches, as a patron and volunteer, I have interacted with LAPL librarians and other workers over the six years I have lived in Los Angeles. In a non-formal but ethnographic way I have paid attention on my visits to get a sense of what people are doing in or around there. Once I experienced a Wi-Fi failure in my home and drove with my laptop to the parking lot of the closest branch, which was closed for the night, and realized that another person had the same idea. This allowed me to think more about how library sponsored service and community exist outside the building. My experiences also include the time that a librarian commented on one of the research books I was checking out and suggested another title that I might like.

Finally I completed a series of formal observation reports at three branches of the LAPL. I selected branches apart from where I volunteer since the workers know me and I want to be as invisible as possible so that what I was observing was more normative and less of a performance. I brought a laptop and sat in the place where I could see the most; computer stations, stacks of books, DVD collections, and the check out area. I created a series of quantifiable notes based on age, gender and a guess at ethnic background. I also wrote a series of close up qualitative impressions of how people spend their time in a library. Both of these types of notes

ended up being of interest to me but I did not use my own quantifiable data, opting to rely on the wide-ranging LAPL reports, or national data from the American Library Association (ALA).

Chapter Overviews

Chapter One: History includes the founding of the public library in the United States and an overview of some of the changes that have occurred since. I will show throughout this thesis that the role of the library has changed over time. Therefore it is useful to have a sense of the early philosophy, both by philanthropists and tax payers, behind the beginning of this institution. To give a sense of comparison there is also a brief introduction to the history of other countries, England and Canada, that began free libraries around the same time. I find it useful to have a sense of comparative municipal library history since I use several British sources later in the work. The way that computers and digital archiving have been instated in libraries, and the role of librarian in this process, is explained in the last section of the chapter.

Chapter Two: Democracy includes research into the anthropology of democracy to show that far from being a fixed classification, democracy is spoken about and defined differently in all of the places where it exists. My research into this facet looked into the work of anthropologist Julia Paley who stated that one should work on “relinquishing preconceived notions of what democracy is or should be” (2008: 4). Paley suggests that her work suggests a move away from, “seeking a core definition of democracy and closer, instead, to an awareness of democracy’s

open-ended construction” (2008: 4). This chapter includes a look at the history of segregation and censorship in American library history. The rhetoric about public libraries typically uses a discourse of “access for all people.” Which people? And what material?

Chapter Three: Community is about the library as a public building and how and why people gather within the space. The structure serves as a cultural center for classes and lectures, a location for working, a safe place for children, and a space for homeless people to spend time when shelters are closed. In the latter half of the chapter I focus on the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) system because this is where I am a patron and volunteer. I look at a recent vote on “Measure L” that helped to decide how libraries might be funded in order to resume some services that have been drastically cut.

In the Epilogue I make a summary of my findings by way of thinking about the future. The 21st century digital age is firmly upon the library system of the United States. Digital access and archiving are far from simplistic changes for a public institution to make and offer a chance to think about funding, control and ownership. I believe that the next phase of the public library will be a difficult one because voters will have to assess and make decisions about the worth of a beloved but fractured and money-starved institution.

Chapter One: History

Authorized by state law [The free public library is], supported by taxation, and accessible, without charge, to the public. It is the library of a democratic society, and requires an environment where caste is unknown; where provision of educational opportunity is accepted as a public responsibility; where books are abundant and their value is widely appreciated. (Thompson 1952: 1)



Boston Public Library-Circa 1900

<http://bookmeat.wordpress.com/2010/02/09/bookbinding-exhibition-bound-for-success/>

In 1850 Charles Jewett, the Smithsonian Institution's librarian stated that, "libraries which are accessible- either without restriction, or upon conditions with which all can easily comply-to every person who wish to use them for their appropriate purposes...in this sense I believe it may be said that all libraries in this country which are not private property...are public libraries" (Thompson 1952: 2).

A public library could easily be considered a place where one is welcome to enter but has to pay a membership fee. Many books and journal entries that I have read from the early years of libraries in the United States indeed call public libraries any grouping of books that is created with some form of sharing in mind. But the focus of this thesis is on the democratically tax funded public library. It interests me because of the way that the idea of the library, and the way politicians, librarians, and patrons speak about it, heavily leans on different definitions of democracy for support.

The creation of a public library could not “be successfully imposed upon the people by authority” (Thompson 1952: 189). In 1841 a Boston area citizen’s committee group stated, ‘For such an institution to accomplish its whole purpose it must be in the highest sense popular. That is, it must have directly engaged in its formation and use the whole people’ (Thompson 1952: 189). Regarding early library rhetoric I often found the use of the inclusive ideology found in the phrase “the whole people.” Not everyone *was* welcome in the library during the early years in the same way that not every American was allowed to vote. This is an element of American history that I explore further in Chapter Two, which deals with Democracy, Segregation and Censorship. This chapter follows the *idea* of a public library—the reliance on free access to information, that is, information that is provided by tax funds—and I start with the history of the institution’s founding in the United States.

Early Library History in the United States

In 1731 Benjamin Franklin formed “the oldest and most famous of all subscription libraries”⁶ (Rose 1954: 15). The idea of a tax-supported public library was still over 100 years away. According to Stuart Murray, in the first part of the 19th century “community libraries were thriving” in one of two ways. They were either “social” libraries, like Franklin’s, with paid membership or “general” libraries set up by a benefactor. Combining the two styles there were approximately one thousand of these libraries in the New England region during this time period and about the same number spread out around the United States (Murray 2009: 173). A “social” library, at that time, was often tailor made for a trade union’s use. The Mechanic’s Institute in San Francisco, still in operation since 1854 in a gorgeous historic building on Post Street, is an example of an institution to which patrons paid a subscription to belong. In the book *American Public Library* it is explained that social libraries incorporated a, “belief that universal education is essential for the welfare of the republic; belief in the power of books as a deterrent from vice and a source of education and culture” (Thompson 1952: 188-9). A library for anyone but a small selection of the financially advantaged were, “sporadic and usually led a brief existence in small social clubs, in church parishes, in semi-private collections, in the subscription of association libraries formed by the members of a business or social group for their own use and that of their friends” (Rose 1954: 14).

The idea of a public library funded with taxes was becoming prevalent. A benefactor of a library cultivated in New York State solely for young people

⁶ The Philadelphia Library Company

suggested using the taxes on alcoholic beverages to fund free public libraries. The man was Jesse Torrey and he wrote a book in 1817 called *The Intellectual Torch* in which he explains the value of libraries paid with taxpayer money. Torrey argued that, “developing an original, economical and expeditious plan for the universal dissemination of knowledge and virtue...” was vital to the strength of this country and his work helped usher in what Murray refers to as “The Library Movement” (Murray 2009: 174). According to Murray the wealthiest groups in America were compelled to educate their countrymen because it would “make them better citizens” (Murray 2009: 174). The incoming immigrant population would benefit from public libraries because they could have a “better chance of integrating into American society if they could read American publications” (Murray 2009: 174). Librarian Ernestine Rose wrote that the “public library had its birth” in the “atmosphere of the early Republic, with its fervid struggling conditions and its bright, new revolutionary thought” (1954: 27). The “cloistered institution of the ages” was influenced by “the growing industrial age, with the influx of Europe’s underprivileged myriads, eager for a chance in this new world, with the doors of opportunity opening, and all America alive with confidence and swagger, the public library made a quiet, steady advance” (1954: 27). In her book *The Public Library in American Life* Rose called the institution, “one of the most significant symbols of a democratic society” (1954: 8).

The “birthday” of the American public library is agreed to be on April 3, 1848, when the city of Boston was authorized by the legislature of the American Commonwealth to “establish and maintain” a “municipal institution” (Basbanes

2003: 358). After construction the grand Boston Public Library building opened in 1854 (Rose 1954: 21). It was the “first publicly supported municipal library in the United States” and became the “leading model for the modern urban public library” (Murray 2009: 166). Boston had the “first large free municipal library in the United States” (Boston Public Library Website-2010) and was the first to “allow patrons the privilege of taking books home, and the first to establish a branch system” (Basbanes 2003: 362). Murray states that by the 1870s all major cities in the United States had a public library and that there were 188 public libraries established by 1875. They were founded by absorbing smaller collections and supported by private donors. In ten years the figure was over six hundred.

By direct comparison to the United States, Great Britain founded free public libraries within a two-year period⁷ after a similar history of both membership and social libraries. According to the website Politics.co.uk, “the Free Library Movement was one of the many groups in the mid-Victorian period working for the ‘improvement of the public’ through education” (2005). The first free public library was opened in Manchester in 1852 and the following year saw the Act “extended to Scotland and Ireland in 1853” (Politics.co.uk 2005). The growth of the library system was, “heavily dependent on the donations of philanthropists, such as John Passmore Edwards, Henry Tate and Andrew Carnegie. By 1900, there were 295 public libraries across Britain” (Politics.co.uk 2005). Scottish-American Carnegie gave money for libraries in Canada and Great Britain and other places around the world. The Free Libraries Act passed in Canada in 1882. Canada’s first publicly

⁷ The Public Libraries Act passed in 1850.

funded library opened in Saint John, New Brunswick in 1883. A branch in Toronto, Ontario, rapidly followed.



Campaign card for the free public library in Canada, c.1882.

<http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/about-the-library/library-history/>

The implication of the first public library to Kevin Starr, the former director of the San Francisco Library, is the importance of the location of a library as the hub of a municipality. Starr states, "Right from the start, the Boston Public Library signaled a movement that said, 'Where do you find a city? You find it here'" (Basbanes 2003: 365). What I sense from Starr's quote is that city moves out from a flagship public library because for a city to truly and meaningfully exist a library must be at its center. A public place anchors cities in the United States for the purpose of signaling the importance of knowledge as a symbol of a democracy. Starr's suggestion that a public library carries a symbolic weight is reflected in his

belief that, “in city after city, the public library becomes the shared public space, the area in which the poetry, the history, the identity of a particular community is expressed, and the Boston Public Library does this gloriously—in terms of its intellectual identity. It says, ‘Here is something fine and enduring about Boston’” (Basbanes 2003: 365).

To Starr, the placement and architecture of a building represents the ethos of an American city and its citizens. Early American public library discourse includes a strong representation the use of individual voices within a democratic society. In 1852 Boston Mayor Benjamin Seaver asked a panel of city dwellers to “outline in specific detail” the type of items that should be “attained by the establishment of the Public Library” (Basbanes 2003: 359). The trustees felt a responsibility to the “intellectual well-being of its citizens” because, “a large public library is of the utmost importance as the means of completing our system of public education” (Basbanes 2003: 359). A well-rounded selection should include, “*Books that few persons will wish to read*, and of which, therefore, only one copy will be kept”⁸ (Basbanes 2003: 364). Former Boston Library president Bernard A. Margolis referred to this passage as his favorite because, “it was a stroke of wisdom on the part of the founders to place it right there alongside the things that everybody want to read...these are materials that document a community, and speak to an interest that may be there fifty years, a hundred years, from now. (Basbanes 2003: 364). As the Nicholson Baker article highlights, the fate of books that few people want to read has shifted in the digital age.

⁸ Italics used in original document.

Librarian Scott Douglas wrote about his profession saying that, “you could go to any library in the world and it would still be the same...how many other professions did this happen in?” (2008: 188). I think of librarians as people who were never voted into their position but continuously do the “action” of democracy because they act as a conduit between policy and people bringing the idea of a library as a place of equality to their everyday dealings with patrons. In 1853 the first Librarian Convention was held in New York City and according to author Stuart Murray it “was also probably the first of its kind in the world” (2009: 179). For three days the 82 participants “made speeches, some prepared, others apparently extemporaneous, on various aspects of their common interest” which included “cataloging, classifying and indexing” and “the proper selection of books” (Murray 2009: 179). The American Library Association (ALA) stated that, “this first convention began a new era in American librarianship, and the effects and impetus had not been entirely dissipated” by 1876, when the ALA was founded (Murray 2009: 179).

Ernestine Rose calls the founding of the ALA “a small but significant milestone on the road to modern public library service” but a “horse-and-buggy affair” because for the first decade following 1876, “the conferences were still full of heated debates about the pros and cons of open-shelf book collections and special services to children” and “professional training was non-existent” (1954: 22). Rose found the time between the ALA founding in 1876 and the mid twentieth century when she wrote to be an era that saw the “emergence of the public library as a distinct institution [and] the beginnings of professional librarianship as a distinct

institution” which required “turning a cloistered, clerical occupation, ‘keeping’ the books, into a socially conscious profession, making books work for the public welfare” (Rose 1954: 22). Librarians have greatly influenced the institution, as they do today, but as should be expected they don’t fall in line with one another on the specifics of library issues.

Public libraries were open to citizens but the “stacks,” the aisles of books, were closed. Librarians took title and subject information from patrons and returned with suitable selections. Rose believed a “typical city library in, say, the year 1885” to be “dingy, if dignified, dimly lighted, its walls painted the ubiquitous muddy buff considered suitable for a public institution” (1954: 27). The “sacred book collection” [said playfully in context] is protected by “a self-contained librarian...a boy or girl ‘runner’ whose duty it is to procure the wanted book from the stacks for the would-be reader, who fills out the necessary information from the card catalogue...but never penetrates the closed gates to the books beyond” (1954: 27). Beyond this transaction a patron was free to spend time in the library’s reading rooms or in some branches to take the titles home.

A major change in the way the institution operated was the opening of the shelves for browsing. Some of the books in Boston were displayed on an open shelf in 1890, “which was an “obviously democratic move [that] was made tentatively, against the severest opposition by many conservative librarians and library boards” (Rose 1954: 28). John Cotton Dana, in his 1899 book *A Library Primer*, stated, “let the shelves be open, and the public admitted to them, and let the open shelves strike the keynote of the whole administration” (Murray 2009: 187). Dana, working in

Denver, and William F. Brett, of the Cleveland Public Library, were “two [librarian] pioneers in this movement” (Rose 1954: 28). The protection of the books, over-handled and “shop worn” in the jargon of a bookstore, was often the given reason to keep the stacks locked. The impression I sense is that the many of the lofty-minded library workers appreciated their position as a separate entity with sole control over who received books. Dana, a man described by Ernestine Rose as “an intellectual aristocrat” and “an iconoclast, an explorer, a smasher of traditions” he acted a, “constant thorn in the flesh of his more conservative colleagues” (1954: 211). In Rose’s 1954 book Dana comes across as the hero of the public library promoting open stacks and “high literary standards” (211).

The modern American library, with stacks that can be browsed by patrons, was largely formed by the financial and ideological influence of philanthropist and industrialist Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919). Carnegie’s special focus on libraries was inspired by the earlier philanthropic work of Enoch Pratt who had contributed 1 million dollars to form the Baltimore Public Library in 1866. Carnegie spent over \$40 million to construct 1,670 libraries in 1,412 communities in the United States built between 1886 and 1917. He believed in a “Gospel of Wealth” in which affluent Americans should donate to others in the service of “the improvement of mankind” (Murray 2009: 183). Carnegie stated that, “There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the free public library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration” (Los Angeles Library Foundation Newsletter 2011).

Carnegie thought it mandatory that citizens be able to browse the stacks because of something that had happened in his early life. Murray relates the story that the 14-year-old Andrew Carnegie, who had recently arrived from Scotland to Pennsylvania, was invited, along with other boys, to use the private library of a local man. In his 1920⁹ autobiography Carnegie stated, “It was from my own early experience that I decided there was no use to which money could be applied so productive of good to boys and girls who have good within them and ability and ambition to develop it, as the founding of a public library in a community which is willing to support it as a municipal institution” (1986: 45).

Carnegie’s financial gifts had an impact on the community to which it was given. There was a caveat that the community in which the library would be built must spend 10% of the original gift on the upkeep of the building and the payment of the staff. In addition to donating the site they were also, “required to draw on public funds to run the library—not use only private donations” (Murray 2009: 184). Arguably the most famous public library building in the United States is the New York City flagship on Fifth Avenue, which is privately funded. This building, with two stone lions guarding the entrance, is a public research library not a circulation branch. It was established in 1895 by a 3 million dollar bequest from philanthropist and politician Samuel J. Tilden with the covenant that it remain funded by donation not tax money.

⁹ Carnegie’s wife published the autobiography the year after he died.



One of the two stone lions outside of the New York City Public Library on Fifth Avenue. <http://zirkdeklerk.wordpress.com/>

According to Murray, Carnegie's wish was that these libraries would become a "fabric of the public life and the responsibility of the community." Cities, if not directly offered grant money by Carnegie, could apply. Some communities turned down a grant to avoid the mandatory 10% maintenance fees taken out of their tax funds (Murray 2009: 186). This refusal "always disappointed" Carnegie because he felt that working people should be able to walk into a library and think, "Behold, all this is mine. I support it, and I am proud to support it. I am the joint proprietor here" (Murray 2009: 186). This quote from Carnegie is one way of thinking about how democracy relates to a public space. In fairness, some union leaders took offense to

Carnegie's generosity towards public donation because it was considered distasteful considering how the industrialist gained his wealth.

Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, thought Carnegie should try and balance out the long hours that workers were due at the philanthropists' labor sites because then they "will have some chance and leisure in which to read books" (Murray 2009: 186). A railroad union official said Carnegie should have, "distributed his money among his employees while he was making it. No man can accumulate such wealth honestly" (Murray 2009: 185). One gets the sense that Carnegie admired individuals that pulled themselves up by the bootstraps and worked hard to better their lives but had scant patience for anyone challenging his status as a benefactor. In a 1899 essay Carnegie wrote, "The main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves; to provide the means by which those who desire to improve do so; to give those who desire to rise the aids by which they may rise; to assist, but rarely or never to do all" (Basbanes 2003: 365). And in Carnegie's own words a "library belongs to every citizen, richest and poorest alike" and this collection of people gives the library "a soul" (Murray 184). Carnegie's ideals of equality have detractors but what remains is an unparalleled legacy of creating public buildings in America.

Turn of the century philanthropic donations provide a place to think about how donors detracted from one another in regard to the type of books that should be provided to the public. In the book *Reform and Reaction* author Rosemary Ruhig Dumont wrote that philanthropists promoted libraries because they felt "books had the power to help men more effectively help themselves" (1977: 51-2). According to

Dumont, Pratt thought that the power inherent in books was in the form of non-fiction and that the “limitations of the masses who had only a mediocre common school education” could be best served by reading about economics (1977: 51). Carnegie held the opposite view, encouraging the reading of fiction, and stated that “it is doubtful if any other form of literature would so well serve the important end of lifting hard-working men out of the prosaic and routine duties of life” (Dumont 1977: 61). Further education would become a reasonable goal if the American masses gained a “taste for reading” (Dumont 1977: 61). In either case “the pride and myth of America were in those men who uplifted themselves, unfolding their latent powers to become wealthy and powerful” (Dumont 1977: 51-2).

The idea that the library served as a site for workers to “uplift themselves” is democratic in the egalitarian sense that it is conceivably possible for a person from any background to gain financial success. To Dumont the major philanthropic philosophy agreed upon by Pratt, Tilden, and Carnegie was a fear of the power of the masses. Dumont states that “the squalid conditions of urban areas, coupled with the organized movements toward reform made after 1890, provoked a widespread fear of social convulsion among men of wealth” and workers should be convinced that “they had more to gain from honest study and self-improvement than from vague projects of social reform” (1977: 52). According to Dumont, Carnegie ascertained that a:

concentration of wealth in the hands of a few—the fittest—was a natural part of history as described by the evolutionists.¹⁰ The study of library materials would encourage acceptance of this system and dreams of economic advancement in the

¹⁰ Victorian era anthropologists that believed in social evolutionary theory thought that humans could move past a “primitive” or “savage” state to become “civilized.”

tradition of Horatio Alger rather than Karl Marx. The dislike of socialism was a strong motive in Carnegie's philanthropies. His gifts for libraries reflected his belief in a slow evolutionary development, encouraging men to make 'steady progress upward.' (Dumont 1977: 62)

The contradiction, summarized by Dumont, is that these major financial supporters held a "concept of culture [that] reflected a devotion to the pursuit of material success, a life in which intellectual and artistic achievement mattered only when they could be made to subserve some useful purpose (1977: 140). While using the democratic framework of access for everyone great financial influence was not without strings attached.

Librarians working at the turn of the century experienced pressure after accepting the financial gifts of philanthropists. The "building of scholarly collections and serving the masses is in many ways competitive" but librarians were in a position to be thankful for the enormous sums being given around the country while adhering to some of Carnegie's sway (Dumont 1977: 139). Dumont explains, "librarians were not merely demonstrating their accommodation to this wealthy group. They were simply doing what all people involved in social services had to do: reach out to wealthy men to help them expand their services and influence" (1977: 55). At times librarians were helpful in the campaign to promote philanthropy and used some of the same rhetoric as the capitalist. Dumont quotes a 1910 article by librarian Louis Round Wilson called "Public Library as an Educator" in which he states, "The public library is the best weapon against corruption and discontent...a democratic country can flourish only when the instinct of self-perfection as it exists in every American is thoroughly satisfied" (*Library Journal* 1977: 55). In this early

era what seems important about a library is that it provided a free place for Americans to educate themselves.

In the first decade of the 20th century Rose states that, “libraries began to turn definitely toward more popular materials and methods. Our earlier librarians, ready as they were to help the poor and less literate, lived in a world where the library clientele was drawn largely from the educated and privileged classes” (1954: 170). The United States experienced a “rise of demanding labor and the flood of immigration” that “rolled on to sweep the public library from its aloofness and isolation, these forces served, too, to turn the thought of librarians strongly toward the needs of the ignorant and submerged groups” (Rose 1954: 170). Educating the masses remained a focus for the public library in this era. Archibald MacLeish was appointed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to serve as the director general of Library War Services. MacLeish wrote Roosevelt’s speech for the 1942 ALA national meeting, which contained the following passage:

In our country’s first year of war, we have seen the growing power of books as weapons...This is proper, for a war of ideas can no more be won without books than a naval war can be won without ships... We will either educate the people of this republic to know and therefore to value and therefore to preserve their own democratic culture or we will watch the people...trade their democratic culture for the nonculture, the obscuratization, the superstition, the brutality, the tyranny (Kranich 2001: 10-11).

MacLeish’s phrasing contains much of the rhetoric that is noteworthy about public library history; education as a force for advancement, the responsibility of a government towards the taxpayers, and democracy as a defensible “culture.”

The modern library, with open shelves and some community events, is largely unchanged in the past 100 years. After reading my first draft, a fellow

student commented that the library of my youth was roughly unchanged from the early Carnegie branches and that earlier institution is something that she, as a twenty year old, can never truly experience. What has changed is the use of websites as a tool for patrons and librarians, digitally archived systems, space for public computers, and the electronic book. In the next section the change from paper to digital is explained.

Recent Library History

“Show me a computer expert who gives a damn and I’ll show you a librarian.”—Patricia Berger, former president of the American Library Association (Johnson 2010: unpaginated opening papers)

According to author Marilyn Johnson the library has become a place where “librarians have come out from behind their desks to serve as active enablers in the digital age” (2010: 10). This leadership role started in a rocky manner as librarian Don Borchert expresses by stating “there is horror in the new” about the time when computers were installed in his branch (2007: 15). Borchert reports that a librarian co-worker asked to be transferred from their branch to one without computers, a situation unimaginable approximately just 15 years later. The rise of computers as a creative medium is “much more visible now. And we have to figure out—what’s the role of the librarian supporting that?” (Johnson 2010: 191).

The “relatively slow turnover in the ranks of elders—worked against streamlined innovation and took a toll on progress, at least measured by the high tech crowd” which created a divide between library workers based, mostly, on age and comfort with technology (Johnson 2010: 59). In 2010, Karen Schneider, the

blogger behind *Free Range Librarian* appraised other library workers who are around her age, which she gives as 50: “If you don’t do the technology by now, you’re either retired or you’re off in a corner, waiting to be retired. There is still too much tolerance in the profession for being uncomfortable with technology” (Johnson 2010: 59). Schneider recalled an unnamed blogger that said, “Only in our profession would people who consider e-mail annoying be allowed to serve on a committee for tech innovation” (Johnson 2010: 59). Since Schneider helped to start “Tech Source,” an ALA blog, she “prodded and hectored librarians to use the tools of the web and rethink the profession” (Johnson 2010: 60). Reflecting on the time when computers starting becoming a part of his duties librarian Scott Douglas states that, “the longer I looked at them the more I had a vision of what the library was turning into—a digital fortress where people used computers as primary sources, and books only if they couldn’t find what they needed” (2008: 26).

Perhaps the awkward phase while libraries re-imagined their purpose will be considered a short one. I asked Britt, a soon to graduate Library Science major I met at a LAPL rally, about how she considered digital information to fit within the library system and she said that she embraces the use because it is, “just a further understanding of how to control and organize information.” Within the librarian community, workers interested in pushing for a greater use and understanding of the power of digital archiving are known as “Librarian 2.0.” Kara Jesella profiled the crowd in the *New York Times* article “A Hipper Brand of Shushers” (2007). The article, featuring a photo of fashionable and tattooed people, one librarian actually has a tattoo of the Federal Depository Library Program logo on his arm, appears in

the Fashion & Style section. The claim Jesella makes is that this, typically, younger group is moving forward with a “focus now on finding and sharing information beyond just what is available in books.” Jesella questions, “Librarians? Aren’t they supposed to be bespectacled women with a love of classic books and a perpetual annoyance with talkative patrons — the ultimate humorless shushers?” (2007). Jesella quotes one 26-year-old librarian as being attracted to the profession due to a combination of “‘geeky intellectualism’ with information technology skills and social activism” (2007). One blogger/librarian explained to Jesella that the younger generation of librarians found the career because, “‘It’s become a techie profession’” (2007).

The younger librarians Jesella profiled are interested in “left-wing social engagement” because as a group they, “‘graduated around the same time as the Patriot Act’ and are aware of ‘what happens when information is restricted’” (2007). In the following chapter the work librarians do as the “innovators, activists and pioneers” is examined as the people that help to defend “free access to information [as] the foundation to democracy” (Johnson 2010: 8).

Marilyn Johnson wrote *This Book is Overdue!: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All* from her perspective as a proud patron of libraries. The book focuses on how librarians, not the Internet, should be valued as the element that “were making a difference” in the information age (2010: 13). To support that claim Johnson cites a contest sponsored at a public library in Australia. Two librarians, one using the Internet only and the other using only the library’s reference resources, went head to head with a series of questions over a period of five days.

The questions had to be answered in 45 minutes and were made up of subjects such as, what alternative therapies exist for Parkinson's disease or who were the "women writers of the Beat Generation" (2010: 21). The librarian using only the in-house database was, "more efficient, accurate and concise (she could find great answers in two or three minutes) than the one surfing Google. Although he had been very resourceful wading through the junk to find authoritative answers" (Johnson 2010: 22). The moderator declared the patrons the winners and Johnson agrees, "we patrons are lucky; we get to use both the library's resources and the Web" (2010: 22).

Patrons rely on a librarian's overall ability to problem solve, use reasoning and their social ability. By social ability I am referring to the story Johnson relates about how the Internet is very useful unless one doesn't phrase their questions correctly. A reference librarian got a question from a patron about books on "bootyism" and through a verbal exchange realized that the patron was referring to Buddhism. As Johnson points out a Google search of "bootyism" gives a seemingly endless supply of "all you ever wanted to know about booty shaking" (2010: 21).

I asked my librarian informant, Julie, via email, if books could be thought of as suffering because of the Internet, she answered:

I used to rue the heavy use of computers in the library, but now I'm glad of them. They are a major drawing point to get people here in the first place. People who would never think they have a reason to go into a library are coming in droves because of the computers (and free wireless)...So, libraries will only continue to be important by providing free access to the internet, and *they* won't suffer. Will books suffer? The format of books may change due to Kindle or other reads-like-paper media, but information and story in book-length fashion won't. The way the internet has revolutionized FINDING your info/answer takes some of the stigma and torture out of research. I think it's going to turn more and more people to the books that are perfect for them. I'm optimistic. I think paper books will last for a few more generations due to nostalgia, but I think the over-publishing will cease eventually. Since digital storage is so

precarious (software updating that renders old versions obsolete, hard drive crashes, other hideous perishability), I think, in the far future, some paper volumes will be published as a backup (and stored like gold bricks in high security storage facilities), but widespread distribution of paper books will stop (or be very expensive, as in collectibles).

The form of books is also changing and now includes electronic books, referred to as e-books, which are becoming a popular because of the ease, immediacy, and affordability associated with downloading an entire novel on a personal handheld device, such as the Amazon.com supported Kindle or an iPad. Public libraries list e-books on their databases next to print versions. I asked Celia, who uses a Kindle for reading new novels but checks out other books from the library, if it is possible that books will go away entirely, to which she said, "I think that the way that would happen is if everyone fell in love with the Kindle." Unlike independent bookstores who will suffer if this happens, libraries are in a position to embrace the change further. Librarian Julie commented that books will remain "for a few generations due to nostalgia" but that the "[Los Angeles Public Library] LAPL will start checking out Kindle-style e-books to download relatively soon."

I asked Rita, LAPL coordinator of volunteers, for some thoughts on the tension between books and computers and she replied that she was just reading that, "more books are selling online than in print form because they are cheaper. So I think that is one thing we have to consider is where...what is the future of physical books." Rita feels that, "It's probably the younger people that want to Kindle and the older people who want the books, real books." Publishing e-books is still in the early stages whereas the same process for publishing "real books," to use Rita's telling phrase, has remained unchanged for a solid 150 years. That affects libraries because

some e-book publishers such as HarperCollins, have included software that erases the book after around 25 views. According Julie Bosman, in a 2011 *New York Times* article, librarians are boycotting HarperCollins purchases in what is deemed “a fresh and furious debate in the publishing world” about the accessibility of “the perfect library book. Its pages don’t tear. Its spine is unbreakable. It can be checked out from home. And it can never get lost” (“Publisher Limits Shelf Life for Library E-Books”). Blogger *Free Range Librarian* states that “physical books will go away...the electronic format of ebooks represents the ultimate bonanza for publishers: the ability to insert a tollbooth in front of every reading transaction” but in the current era “I think the problem lies in the fact that a lot of librarians and admin don’t really know shit about eBooks. Admin’s role has changed from less about being the guardian of the library to more of a fundraiser/politician role” (2010).

Possibilities

What does the future hold? Project Gutenberg, started in 1971, is a digital archive of books that have entered into the public domain. The website, where one can print or read books online, is a non-profit started by a single person who is still in charge, that requires and asks for volunteers and donations. Some signs point towards a truly revolutionary public policy venture that may change the landscape of what a public library does in a society. A *New York Review of Books* blog post called “A Library Without Walls” asks, “Can we create a National Digital Library?” (Darnton 2010). Blogger Robert Darnton refers to the idea of “a comprehensive library of digitized books that will be easily accessible to the general public” to be an “extraordinarily complex” undertaking (2010). The complexities are political,

technological, legal, and financial but Darnton also describes the idea as, “at its core, straightforward” (2010). Darnton continues:

The NDL [National Digital Library] would make the cultural patrimony of this country freely available to all of its citizens. It would be the digital equivalent of the Library of Congress, but instead of being confined to Capitol Hill, it would exist everywhere, bringing millions of books and other digitized material within clicking distance of public libraries, high schools, junior colleges, universities, retirement communities, and any person with access to the Internet.

Behind the creation of the American republic was another republic, which made the Constitution thinkable. This was the Republic of Letters—an information system powered by the pen and the printing press, a realm of knowledge open to anyone who could read and write, a community of writers and readers without boundaries, police, or inequality of any kind, except that of talent. Like other men of the Enlightenment, the Founding Fathers believed that free access to knowledge was a crucial condition for a flourishing republic, and that the American republic would flourish if its citizens exercised their citizenship in the Republic of Letters.

Of course, literacy was limited in the eighteenth century, and those who could read had limited access to books. There was an enormous gap between the hard realities of life two centuries ago and the ideals of the Founding Fathers. You could therefore accuse the Founders of utopianism. For my part, I believe that a strong dose of utopian idealism gave their thought its driving force. I think we should tap that force today, because what seemed utopian in the eighteenth century has now become possible. We can close the gap between the high ground of principle and the hardscrabble of everyday life. We can do so by creating a National Digital Library.

The Dutch are now digitizing every Dutch book, pamphlet, and newspaper produced from 1470 to the present. President Sarkozy of France announced last November that he would make €750 million available to digitize the nation’s cultural “patrimony.” And the Japanese Diet voted for a two-year, 12.6 billion yen crash program to digitize their entire national library. If the Netherlands, France, and Japan can do it, why can’t the United States?

I propose that we dismiss the notion that a National Digital Library of America is far-fetched, and that we concentrate on the general goal of providing the American people with the kind of library they deserve, the kind that meets the needs of the twenty-first century. We can equip the smallest junior college in Alabama and the remotest high school in North Dakota with the greatest library the world has ever known. We can open that library to the rest of the world, exercising a kind of “soft power” that will increase respect for the United States worldwide. By creating a National Digital Library, we can make our fellow citizens active members of an international Republic of Letters, and we can strengthen the bonds of citizenship at home. (2010)

Much of the competitive rhetoric of early library history is expressed when Darton recaps the great steps other countries have taken and the importance of the United States not falling behind.

The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University is organizing a meeting in the summer of 2011 to assess the possibility of a “Digital Public Library of America” in the vein of what Darnton described. Doing so will “fulfill the vision of an open, distributed network of comprehensive online resources that draws on the nation’s living heritage to educate, inform and empower everyone in this and future generations,” according to fundraiser Doron Weber (“Berkman Center Announces Digital Public Library Planning Initiative” 2010). Representatives from “the educational community, public and research libraries, cultural organizations, state and local government” will convene for the meetings along with the federally funded cultural institutions; the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the Smithsonian Institution (“Berkman Center Announces Digital Public Library Planning Initiative” 2010). According to David Ferriero, Archivist of the United States and former head of research libraries at The New York Public Library, “It is exciting to contemplate a future where the cultural heritage of our country is available at your fingertips” (“Berkman Center Announces Digital Public Library Planning Initiative” 2010).

The library will be, as librarian Scott Douglas states, a place that is undergoing a transformation including, “technologies [that] would change” and “patrons [that] would change, but the role of the library as the gateway to something greater would always stay the same” (2008: 13). In my research the definition of

what a “gateway to something greater” means is a continued awareness of how to supply information. I interviewed Paula, a reserved person with a soft voice, who suddenly sat up straight during our interview and stated emphatically that, “LIBRARIES ENCOURAGE KNOWLEDGE. I can’t really imagine a world without libraries cuz they make knowledge...PUBLIC.” Books, the element of the library that I revere, provide information but of course so do online sources. And as Rita said, there are “all kinds of databases you wouldn’t have access to without” a library card and they are available to all citizens. While change is inevitable, the public library still provides free access to information as it has since its inception. My interviews have distilled down the “meaning of the public library” this single word—information. Douglas says that, “We don’t have to destroy the library of the past. We just need to give it a face-lift” (2008: 22).

Chapter Two: How a Public Library is Closely Linked to the Idea of Democracy

“Democracy...required educated, informed citizens” (Murray 2009: 170)

“Now democracy, of all the political systems as yet in use, is the most subtle and the most complicated. It demands the ability to compromise and the ability to see many issues at once” (Eby 1956: 35).

“Getting my library card was like citizenship; it was like American citizenship”—Oprah Winfrey (Kretchmer 2001: 97)

What is important about a public library? One way of answering the question is in thinking about the historically consistent use of the word democratic to describe the American institution. In the book *Libraries & Democracy* a passage from the Public Library Principles Task Force manual is quoted: “Public libraries continue to be of enduring importance to the maintenance of our free democratic society. There is no comparable institution in American life” (Kranich 2001: 31). This is a solid statement in line with a library being exclusive and vital and not merely a pleasurable construct. Public libraries consistently face severe struggles for funding which weighs toward an enjoyable, but hardly crucial, American institution.

The use of the word democratic can be defined in two distinctive ways, as the rule of the majority, or as a count of every citizen as an equal to one another. The library is a useful location to examine the complexity of this dual definition because my research has shown that they are used at different times and different circumstances. What I tried to unpack by analyzing the seemingly simple use of “democratic” is the more complex discourse of identity and status in American society.

From my research I have been aware of many noble statements about the library as a force in democratic thinking. It is hard to square the history of lack of geographic distribution, segregation, and censorship with the grand statements such as John Cotton Dana's from 1916: "No other institution which society has brought forth is so wide in its scope; so universal in its appeal; so near to every one of us; so inviting to both young and old; so fit to teach, without arrogance, the ignorant, and without faltering, the wisest" (Rose 1954: 111). In 1954 Ernestine Rose in her book *The Public Library in American Life*, explains the way she viewed democracy in the public library system:

We come to believe in a democratic society that scholarship and popular education are steps in the same process, phases of progress for all groups and levels...Can it be that librarians, like many other Americans, have lost their way among the many connotations of that word 'democratic'? This is probably the most misunderstood as well as the most ill-used word in our language!... When we speak of 'the people,' we refer, ideologically, to all the people, and the 'supreme power' to govern applies to the power vested in all the people...The library's duty to serve the ill-educated or the economically underprivileged does not release it from a similar obligation to other groups, with a richer background perhaps or with more trained and cultivated tastes. Nor does it dare to separate into categories its services to those of varying background, education, or social status or to imagine that these services fulfill a democratic function only if offered to those of one level rather than another...They are democratic only if offered to all, in terms of opportunity, of individual recognition, and of richness of appeal. (172-3)

Anthropologist Julia Paley edited a book called *Democracy: Anthropological Approaches* in which she states that "discussions of democracy" often start with the question, "How is democracy defined?" (2008: 19). In her work Paley argues, "the precise phenomena we are studying is not predetermined but rather emerges within the various field sites in which we do our research" (19: 2008).

Paley specializes in Ecuador and Chile for her ethnographic research but in this chapter I use the framework she imparts about how there should be "an

awareness of democracy's open-ended construction" (2008: 4). Paley finds the "multiple meanings given to the term democracy [to] suggest that democracy is not a single condition that countries do or do not have, but rather a set of processes unevenly enacted over time" (2002: 479). Rose, a librarian, declared, "Just as this democratic system falls far short of its ideal, as it is confronted constantly by foes without and both foes and flaws within, so is the case with that inherently democratic institution, the public library" (1954: 140). Because of the "lack of a uniform pattern and of regularized control" where democracy exists Rose finds that "its varied and uncertain development, the unevenness of its service, are all characteristic of our civic life and our way of thought" (1954: 140). The authors of the book *The Paradoxes of Democracy* point out the "dangerous fallacy" that democracy can be taught or learned "by taking a course, just as you can learn to cook or to drive a car" (Eby 1956: 46). This sentiment supports the idea that democracy is defined differently in different places, and differently over time.

The use of the word "democratic" to describe the public library through its 160-year history sounds good but requires an awareness that while the library expanded throughout the United States there were, and still are, pockets where people are not served. Or that service hours are being cut back or information censored. The straightforward statements about how the library is a democratic stronghold don't fairly regard this issue, which is useful in thinking about the way Americans define democracy. In the article "Democracy, Sacred and Everyday" it was stated that, "democracy is one of those big words, like freedom and terrorism, that in common currency is more often used than analyzed" (Banerjee 2008: 92).

Segregation

A public library is unique only as it strives to make...knowledge public, as it opens its doors to all persons. (Rose 1954: 7)

Libraries can be desegregated more easily than the schools for a lot of obvious reasons. People get all up in arms when their children have personal contact with children of another race...we have shopped all our lives with Negroes—in the library you shop for a book; in the schools you have social contact”—an anonymous librarian responding to a mid-Twentieth century survey. (Fultz 2006: 349)

At a recent dinner party I met a lively older lady named Agnes who spoke with a heavy German accent. She described herself as a “displaced person” who was “forced out of East Germany in the late 1940’s” when she was 12. She “lost everything” when she left and ended up with some of her siblings growing up in New Jersey. I told her about my thesis project and her eyes brightened as she told me about her first experience with the public library in the United States. She was incredulous—“I couldn’t believe that I could take home as many books as I could carry.” Agnes said that the public library and the privileges extended to her, as a person on the way to American citizenship, was a powerful memory of beginning to belong to a democracy. In October 2010 African-American author and poet Maya Angelou (b. 1928) made a gift of her papers and personal archives to the Schomburg Center, a research branch of the New York Public Library. She told the *New York Times* that, “Nothing is as precious to me as that library” (Lee 2010). Angelou speaks to the value of a public library: “For a person who grew up in the ’30s and ’40s in the segregated South, with so many doors closed without explanation to me, libraries and books said, ‘Here I am, read me’” (Lee 2010). The concept of being welcome in a public library, a place symbolic of intellectual equality, is inherent in

both women's quotes. The public library in the United States before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ruling "separate but equal" laws unconstitutional was an institution that had separate buildings for black Americans. Therefore, during this specific time period, the overall institution existed as a separate entity for Agnes and Angelou.

During the "separate but equal" era, Birmingham, Alabama incorporated "an extreme example" of segregation in a "policy [that] mandated that if in an unforeseen emergency a book was interchanged between the Central Library and the black branch it would have to be replaced, not returned" (Fultz 2006: 352). The American Library Association (ALA) held segregated meetings in the 1930's. The conditions to which Black librarians could attend the ALA meeting in Virginia were explained in a form letter. While being able to attend almost all meetings (if food was served they were not allowed) black librarians were to sit in segregated sections and were not allowed to stay in hotels with white librarians (Dumont "Race in American Librarianship: Attitudes of the Library Profession" 1986).

Black owned social libraries, as described in Chapter One, also existed and were often added on to the building of a nearby segregated high school. In the article "Black Public Libraries in the South in the Era of De Jure Segregation" by Michael Fultz it is stated that,

As late as 1895 there were still no public libraries in nine southeastern states. As another study put it, by the turn of the century the public library situation in the South for both blacks and whites was 'abysmal by any reckoning'...Public libraries for African Americans in the South were not introduced until the first decade of the twentieth century, and then only sporadically. The African American push for public library service was neither so pivotal nor so pronounced as had been the drive for schools in the aftermath of the Civil War, and, indeed, there was about a thirty- to fifty-year lag between the commencement of public schooling for African Americans

in the South and the inception of public library service. The wait was only slightly less, though service was considerably more extensive, for urban whites and was often appreciably longer for rural residents of both races. (2006: 338)

In 1908 The Western Colored Branch became the first “public library in the South for African Americans housed in a Carnegie-funded facility” (2006: 340). According to Fultz by the year 1917, 144 Carnegie grants had been given away throughout southern states for the construction of public libraries (2006: 340). By the year 1926 Fultz states that, “some forty-five libraries provided segregated services for African Americans, a threefold increase, but representing less than 10 percent of the library facility in twelve [southern] states” (2006: 342). The desegregation of the public library system “may not have been a major priority within the civil rights movement, but given their location in the central downtown areas of southern cities, libraries were prime symbolic targets” and the first sit-in protest in Mississippi was held in 1961 at the Jackson Public Library (Fultz 2006: 348).

In the autobiographical book *Black Boy (American Hunger)* author Richard Wright (1908-1960) recounts his early exposure to books. His access to the public library in Memphis was only through a deceptive and dangerous system of forging a note from a white man stating that Wright could check out books on his behalf. The man, “Mr. Falk,” provided Wright with a duplicate library card because he felt that, “it’s good of you to want to read” but that Wright should not “mention this to the other white men” (1944: 290) for fear that they would both be ostracized or worse. It was on Wright’s shoulders to forge the notes and to leave Falk out of the fray. James Baldwin (1924-1987), novelist and playwright, was greatly influenced by Wright. Baldwin wrote, “the full story of black and white in this country is more vast

and shattering than we would like to believe and, like an unhindered infection in the body, it has the power to make our whole organism sick” (2010: xix). In my research I have come across so many statements about democracy and the public library that were made during the time that segregation existed in this country. Baldwin stated in about that time period that “we have seen what happens when the word ‘democracy’ is taken to be a synonym for mediocrity; is not taken to mean to raise all of its members to the highest possible level, but on the contrary to reduce such members as aspire to excellence down to the lowest common denominator” (2010: 71). Segregation in American history is a noteworthy place to examine what author Dee Garrison calls the “simple story of democratic idealism [which] does not reveal the complexities that give library history its real human dimensions” (1979: xii).

Ernestine Rose, the long time librarian of the branch to which Angelou made her donation, understood ‘how vitally important it is that [a librarian] should study people and their interests’ and that by connecting with those interests he or she can make the library ‘a living, vital force’ (Anderson 387: 2003). Rose stated, “It is to be remembered that many of these grown people, coming from the South, have never been permitted to enter a public library. That they are welcome, and that the place is free, must continually be repeated” (Anderson 388: 2003). In the article “A White Librarian in Black Harlem” Rose is remembered as having been “faced with the intractable problem of racial segregation and prejudice” (Jenkins 1990: 217) when she started her post as librarian in 1920. Rose was determined to keep the branch from becoming segregated and her strategy was to “integrate the library staff” (Jenkins 1990: 220). Nella Larsen, an Africa-American novelist known for her part in

the Harlem Renaissance, became the children's librarian (Jenkins 1990: 221). Betty Jenkins, the author of "A White Librarian in Black Harlem" states that, "the 'experiment' of an interracial staff was one of the ways the library could demonstrate its allegiance to democratic principles" (1990: 221). The "open door policy" and outreach to the community were successful. In the first six months of employment at the branch Rose reported an 18% increase in circulation (Jenkins 1990: 222).

What later became known as the Schomberg collection started as a committee that Rose helped to create to support an African-American literature collection of books and materials. Arthur Schomberg, "the Puerto-Rican-born bibliophile," helped to privately fund the collection, which was known as the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints¹¹ (Jenkins 1990: 222). Rose commented that, "The librarian, or anyone else, who is looking for the intellectual, the alert, or the curious mind, may find those minds everywhere, in every group, on every level" (1954: 173).

Angelou recalled her early exposure to libraries:

When I was very young, when I was about seven, I experienced sexual abuse. A few days after I told my family the person's name, the police came and said the man had been found dead. It seemed he had been kicked to death. My seven-year-old self believed my voice had killed him. I stopped speaking. I stopped speaking for six years. I had a voice, but I wouldn't use it. A Black lady from my town took me to the local school, the Black school, and she took me to the library. She told me she wanted me to read every book in that library, starting with A to Br. Then she'd come back and I did Br to D.

And I read every book. Of course, it was a small Black school in a tiny village in Arkansas, so there couldn't be more than a few hundred books...But I read every one. I wasn't talking, so I had time.

I always knew from that moment, from the time I found myself at home in that little segregated library in the South, all the way up until I walked up the steps of the New

¹¹ It was renamed the Schomberg Collection after his death in 1938.

York City library, I always felt, in any town, if I can get to a library, I'll be OK. It really helped me as a child, and that never left me. So I have a special place for every library, in my heart of hearts. (Montefinise "Interview: How Libraries Changed Maya Angelou's Life" 2010)

On the occasion of her donation Angelou described the importance of information being "open" because "it helps you to see that you're not alone...So the library helps you to see, not only that you are not alone, but that you're not really any different from everyone else. There may be details that are different, but a human being is a human being" (Montefinise 2010).

Rose stated that, for a library and its workers or patrons, there is nothing of greater importance than "a knowledge and understanding of the potential dynamic force inherent in an institution which is free, which is open to all, irrespective of race, religion, or political bias" because "it is a solemn obligation on a democratic institution in a society which needs so sorely the beneficent influences of sound education, accurate knowledge in many fields, and an understanding free of prejudice" (1954: 111). Rose saw her words published in 1954, the same year as the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling "separate but equal" laws unconstitutional. In the book *Libraries and Democracy* author Jorge Reina Schement regards the 1950's as the time in which, "some white Americans rejected lesser status for African-Americans. In effect, they raised the standard, reaffirming a commitment to achieve the ideal of democracy in the real world—an achievement for a democracy that began by limiting the vote to white males and registering slaves as three-fifths of a person." (2001: 18). In 2001 Schement wrote that to fully or partially exclude anyone from a public place "is to challenge the very claim to democracy that defines

America” (2001: 18). It is noteworthy to point out that Schement phrased the sentence to imply that democracy *exists* and therefore it “defines America” as opposed to what I am exploring which is that in every place where democracy exists it is defined differently.

Control: Censorship and Access

Most attempts at suppression rest on a denial of the fundamental premise of democracy: that the ordinary individual, by exercising critical judgment, will select the good and reject the bad. We trust Americans to recognize propaganda and misinformation, and to make their own decisions about what they read and believe. We do not believe they are prepared to sacrifice their heritage of a free press in order to be "protected" against what others think may be bad for them. We believe they still favor free enterprise in ideas and expression. (Freedom to Read Statement: American Library Association)

**No one has the right to live without being shocked. No one has the right to spend their life without being offended. Nobody has to read this book. Nobody has to pick it up. Nobody has to open it. And if you open it and read it, you don't have to like it. And if you read it and you dislike it, you don't have to remain silent about it. You can write to me, you can complain about it, you can write to the publisher, you can write to the papers, you can write your own book. You can do all those things, but there your rights stop. No one has the right to stop me writing this book. No one has the right to stop it being published, or bought, or sold or read
—author Philip Pullman as quoted on the blog Swiss Army Librarian**

In 1881 the ALA sent a questionnaire to 70 major public libraries in an attempt to determine which books had been “withdrawn” because they had “offended genteel sensibilities” (Garrison 1979: 74). The books that were most often removed from library shelves had in common a “ rejection of traditional authority, particularly in domestic life, in religious faith, and in matters concerning class distinction” (Garrison 1979: 75). Censorship of material still exists in the American public library but the complaints are more likely to be about sexual content or

language. In the early part of library history in the United States the censorship of books seemed to have been focused on what adults were reading while today the battle is over what children read, an issue that is further explained later in this chapter.

Censorship has two varieties: complaints from citizens and control from the government. Throughout 19th and early 20th century U.S. history the publishing of books became a major industry. Historically, along with a greater number of books comes the desire to ban controversial titles. According to the author of *Library: An Illustrated History* the desire to ban books arose mostly from religious leaders and not librarians themselves. A working librarian “had been instilled with that American ‘library spirit’ which honored intellectual freedom” (Murray 2009: 189). Censorship is not a separate part of library history but rather a part of its ongoing activities. Roberta Stevens, president of the ALA, wrote a 2010 article called “Yes, There is Still Book Banning in The United States” in which she states, “book challenges are not simply an expression of a point of view; they are also an attempt to remove materials from public use, thereby restricting the access of others.” Democracy is sometimes defined as an egalitarian measure and Stevens expresses that, “even if the motivation to ban or challenge a book is well intentioned, the outcome is detrimental. Censorship denies our freedom as individuals to choose and think for ourselves” (2010).

In an *American Libraries* article called “The First Amendment Needs New Clothes” a teacher reports that the Internet filters at her public high school actually blocked a site about the ALA’s Banned Book Week. Students using blogs they

created for their high school reading of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* were denied access from their own writing on from the school's computers. Censoring books and information on the behalf of children is prevalent in the United States. 446

responses followed the Stevens article and the comments quickly turned to a debate about protecting young people from pornography and homosexuality. I include a grouping of related passages for the purpose of examining how some Americans frame their arguments about censorship and create a conversation with other anonymous commentators.¹²

Soundofthunder: The idea that children might resort to reading "forbidden" books for libidinous pleasure is about the funniest thing I have heard in a long time. Are these the same children whose thumbs are bright red from sending illiterate texts all day long?...We should be so lucky to live in a society where children sneak off to the library for titillation.

Notwaff: A short list of topics found in the teen section includes: abortion, abusive relationships, child abuse, depression, drinking, drug use/addiction, mentally / physically abusive relationships, homosexuality, oral sex, rape, sex, smoking, suicide, teen pregnancy, violence, first sexual encounter, self-mutilation, sexual abuse, teacher/student sexual affair, teenage exotic dancing, transsexuality...Unfortunately, in this culture, kids have to be informed about all this because they'll be exposed to it somewhere and some time. I can imagine parents resenting being forced into ending the innocence of their children at a young age. And one place where teens will find it all, and more, is in the teen section of the library. [From a second post] I would imagine that most libraries carry very few books on how to overcome homosexuality and restore your heterosexuality...Even if the American Psychological Association recognizes that individuals should have the freedom of self-determination.

Eric: When is the last time you checked? I would have no problem with libraries having these books as long as they are placed in the section in which they belong-Fiction.

NottWaff: hmmm - good question. If the publisher has the book categorized as "Gender & Sexuality" would the librarian use his/her personal opinion to re-categorize the item. The article says "This year's observance is themed "think for yourself and let others do the same" and commemorates the most basic freedom in a

¹² *The Huffington Post*, where the Stevens article originally appeared, is widely considered to be a liberal leaning news website.

democratic society -- the freedom to read -- and encourages us to respect others' freedom to choose." I would hope the librarian would put this book in "Gender & Sexuality" and give patrons the freedom to read or not read. I think that's the message of the Banned Book Week.

AnimalLover6: People can't "overcome" homosexuality. Homosexuality is natural. It's genetically encoded. It appears in thousands of species across the evolutionary spectrum...You simply "believe." And as a result of that "belief," you think you have the right to determine how other people should live their lives and what books they should or should not have access to.

DragonessD: My parents always told me if I could understand a book, then I was old enough to read it. I don't see the point of banning books, except it's someone else deciding what my children should be allowed to read.

MoreFreedom: The real solution to "banned books" from schools, is to separate the government from the schools...Somehow I doubt Stevens supports this approach, preferring that government control what your kids read. Or perhaps she believes in no control whatsoever, and that kids should have access to porn on the internet in schools and public libraries. I prefer to have control of my kids, and I don't want "the village" deciding for me. The next step "the village" may take, is controlling what my kids eat. All in the name of the children.

BeninaBox1:"The real solution to "banned books" from schools, is to separate the government from the schools." You dislike our political/cultural discourse now?...Supplement the text books if you don't like them. Don't get spoonfed by *anybody*

The debate between these commentators reveals not only the way potential censorship can quickly splinter in many directions but also the passion readers have for confronting one another's viewpoints. The use of blogging and reader's comments is distinctive because of the anonymity of the respondents but also in that it would hard to imagine a natural setting in which this conversation could have been organized and recorded. What follows is an overview of censorship issues starting with the early history when novels for adults were the target and not children.

In the late 1800's "library chieftains" were described in *Apostles of Culture: the Public Librarian and American Society 1876-1920* by author Dee Garrison as "upper middle class to the core, by birth, education, or imitation, they feared that their missionary work with the masses would be subverted by the popular passion" for "suspect fiction" or "light reading" (1979: 68). Garrison states that, "The inveterate novel reader often acquired a craving for constant excitement" and would be in danger of losing "his sober judgment" (1979: 71). The reading of modern novels symbolized an errant mind, "Public libraries regularly published and analyze the figures for the percentage of fiction in the totally yearly circulation. An increase in the percentage brought dark self-questioning. A decrease of one-tenth of a point was cause for joy" (1979: 68). Garrison gave an overview of American libraries in the late 1800's:

The Mercantile Public Library in San Francisco reported 71.4 per cent of its circulation was fiction, while .6 per cent was religious works. In the same year the Indianapolis library crowed that its fiction circulation had dropped from 80 to 72 per cent, after heroic efforts had been made by the librarian to reduce fiction reading. The St. Louis library reported a "remarkably" small circulation of fiction—53.9 per cent. In 1887 a speaker to the New York Library club declared that, "the great mass of reading done by the people is devoted to novels and romances," ranging from 60 to 87 per cent. Three prominent California libraries in 1895 had collection that were 11-13 per cent fiction, yet recorded the percentage in fiction in circulation as from 53-79%. (1979: 68)

Garrison found that these figures of fiction circulation, "had varied little from 1876 to the present, usually between 65-85% of all books loaned during the year in an average public library" (1979: 68).

The "reading taste of the common folk" created a moral division between the "better educated" people who felt that one should read the Greek and Roman

classics or to “read and reread Locke, Bacon, Milton in prose” before reading “modern fiction” (1979: 69). American women were the target of fiction censorship in early American libraries because it was felt that they should be “protected against the inflammatory literature that unsettled morals” (Garrison 1979: 70). As a historic note, in the 19th century women typically accessed the public library through their own reading rooms separate from men (Van Slyck “Carnegie Library Architecture” 1999). Women were thought by some to need protection, and “those books that stimulated her rebellion against the nature of things were a threat to the entire social structure” (Garrison 1979: 70). To the “Victorian-shaped traditionalist, it was important to retain emotional control—to practice self-discipline, self-denial, and rationality. The fusion of ascetic Protestantism and democratic capitalism had internalized a set of cultural values that insisted upon control of sexual expression, spontaneity, and emotion” (1979: 71).

According to Garrison the focus on fiction was because “it was essential that literature describe an idealized world, where example of thought and actions were more noble than actual contact with life could possibly furnish” (73). Garrison explains that the influence of “the traditionalist” in the Victorian era library was used to emphasize, “a noble and idealized world, genteel culture above all sought to teach people how to behave” and “an overriding desire to instruct and elevate the public” (1979: 73). In 1870 Noah Porter published *Books and Reading* in which he warned that it was better to censor literature that lacked a clear moral message. Included is the statement by poet Robert Southey about the nature of a book:

Would you know whether the tendency of a book is good or evil? Examine in what state of mind you lay it down...Has it attempted to abate your admiration and reverence for what is great and good, and to diminish in you the love of your country and your fellow-creatures? Has it addressed itself to your pride, your vanity, your selfishness, or any of your evil propensities? Has it defiled the imagination with what is loathsome and choked the heart with what is monstrous? Has it disturbed the sense of right and wrong which the Creator has implanted? ...If so...throw the book into the fire! (Garrison 1979:72)

The focus on censoring “light reading” was, according to Garrison, intended “to resist or to channel rapid value change. Perhaps conservatives recognized that deviance in moral theory was a good index of radicalism in general” (1979: 67-68). The form of moral policing described here faded around 1905-10 when “virtue no longer consisted of literal obedience to arbitrary standards set by community or church but rather in conduct consistent with a growing personality” (1979: 86). Garrison states that by the turn of the century “library leaders had all but given up an attempt to discredit best-selling fiction” because of the “advent of mass culture” that forced the public library to supply “the reading that reflected mass concerns” (1979: 87).

A catalyst in the change was “maverick” librarian, and an early president of the ALA, John Cotton Dana, who liked to tell his assistants to remember, that “rules were made to be broken” (Garrison 1979:93). While books are revered in some quotes Dana said, “The worst sin against the public the library can commit, is to deny it access to the books themselves. There is nothing sacred about a book” (Hadley 1943: 83). To modern ears “sacred” sound like something that needs protection while the context of Dana’s comment gives a highly practical meaning.

Ernestine Rose wrote about the Library Bill of Rights, first published in 1939, this way, “The principles of its service are simple but imperative, freedom, availability, voluntary and self-directed use. Its affirmations are universal: freedom for all, knowledge for all. Stated negatively, they seem to gain in strength: no censorship; no limitation according to race, color, religion, or national origin, no special privilege for class, or group, or level” (1954: 51). On the American Library Association’s (ALA) website the Library Bill of Rights is as follows:

The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

- I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
- II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
- III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
- IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.
- V. A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.
- VI. Libraries that make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use. (2010)

The first four of the six listed rights directly address the issue of censorship or control of publically funded libraries. The perception of libraries as being intellectually open is a clear perception in literary critic Alfred Kazin’s statement that, “Whenever I was free to read, the great Library seemed free to receive me. Anything I had heard of and wanted to see, the blessed place owned” (Basbanes 2003: 370). Librarians in the United States are importantly positioned as the

instrument to both fight against censorship and raise awareness to the fact that requests to censor flood the American Library Association.

The thought of banning books like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for “coarse language” seems outrageous to some but the ability for a child to get a hold of such a work often seems to be a part of the complaint. When the Brooklyn Public Library banned *Huckleberry Finn* in 1905 the head librarian objected and wrote the author Samuel Clemens¹³ a letter asking him to defend his work. In perfectly sarcastic tones he replied by saying that he agrees with banning because his own mind “became soiled and can never again be “washed clean” because he was “compelled “ by his guardians to read The Bible before he was 15. While it is amusing to read Clemens’ witty response the issue of censorship has hardly faded with time. Removing a book from a library shelf is one issue but in January of 2011 an English professor and Twain scholar at Auburn University oversaw a new version of *Huckleberry Finn* which removed the character name “Nigger Jim” and replaced it with “Slave Jim.” The man, Alan Gribben, felt that his version would not be censored and therefore more accessible to reading lists in public schools with the outcome of higher accessibility of an important American story. Gribben told *Publishers Weekly* that, “for a single word to form a barrier, it seems such an unnecessary state of affairs” (Schultz “Upcoming NewSouth ‘Huck Finn’ Eliminates the N’ Word” 2011).

While this new version of a famous book hasn’t yet become a library issue, it has a very small print run meant for schoolchildren in a few southern states, the strategy of word replacement in a historically continuously contested book is proof

¹³ The librarian wrote not to the penname, Mark Twain, but specifically used Clemens.

that censorship is not a thing of the past. One online reader of the Schultz article commented, “there is a reason the word is in there and you skew and misinterpret the literature if you change it. I think Mark Twain would be proud that his book is on the most banned list, and it only helps open the conversation of banning books in the first place. If we change the language, you are only letting those that would censor free speech win.”

The ALA has 10,676 challenges in its files for the period 1990-2009 with *Huckleberry Finn* making the list every year (“Frequently Challenged Books”). ALA president Stevens stated, “Not every book is right for each reader, but we should have the right to think for ourselves and allow others to do the same” and questioned, “how can we live in a free society and develop our own opinions if our right to choose reading materials for ourselves and our families is taken away? We must remain diligent and protect our freedom to read” (*The Huffington Post* 2010). One person, librarian Judith Krug, was fundamental in the struggle against public library censorship. Krug served as the president of the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom from 1967 to her death in 2009. In 1982 Krug helped found Banned Books Week as a way to involve libraries, bookstores and authors as a united front in the issue of censorship. “My personal proclivities have nothing to do with how I react as a librarian,” Ms. Krug said in an interview with *The New York Times* in 1972 (Martin 2009). Krug succinctly gives an overview of the fight against censorship: “Library service in this country should be based on the concept of intellectual freedom, of providing all pertinent information so a reader can make decisions for himself” (Martin 2009).

Krug told the *New York Times* that many of the issues behind censorship have changed but that, according to journalist Douglas Martin, “Ms. Krug pushed what she often described as a pure view of the First Amendment against what her opponents often said was the democratic will” (2009). Martin quotes a former schoolteacher that tried to get a sex education book banned as stating, “What the library associations are trying to do is make the voice of the people null and void” (2009). Krug showed a steadfast belief in the First Amendment because, as she stated in a rebuttal to an angry letter writer, “if we begin stifling the expression of views we abhor, we only provide a weapon which can just as easily be turned against us” (1972).

Martin reports that, “Ms. Krug fiercely fought a provision in the USA Patriot Act that allows federal investigators to peruse library records of who has read what” (2009). President George W. Bush signed the Act into law in October 2001. The Act was positioned to take deep measures against acts of terrorism following the events on September 11, 2001. Section 215 of the Patriot Act, “permits the FBI director to seek records from bookstores and libraries of books that a person has purchased or read, or of his or her activities on a library's computer” (Bill of Rights Defense Committee: 2009). The Patriot Act enabled Federal agents to loosen the specifications for searches of library records. Specifically, “the FBI no longer must meet the test that “there are specific and articulable facts giving reason to believe that the person to whom the records pertain is a foreign power or an agent of a foreign power” (Bill of Rights Defense Committee: 2009). One of the most damaging parts of the Patriot Act is that, “it also denies booksellers and library personnel the

free speech right to inform anyone, including an attorney, that the FBI has asked for someone's reading list" (Bill of Rights Defense Committee: 2009).

Bernie Sanders, Independent Congressman of Vermont, has twice introduced legislation that would reverse Section 215. Sanders, who voted against the Patriot Act, states, "the people who really educated me were the librarians of Vermont. I received an extraordinarily well-written letter that articulated librarians' concerns and informed me of a number of aspects, especially Section 215, which I had not been familiar with" (Library Journal: 2003). Although Sander's legislation hasn't passed, the movement to overturn Section 215 has bi-partisan support. Meanwhile some librarians have taken to shredding documents pertaining to patron reading records. Sanders refers to librarians as "unsung heroes and heroines" because the country is "moving more and more to an entertainment culture, a sound bite culture, but librarians have maintained, saying, 'It's important for the American people to get all kinds of information'" (*Library Journal* "Bernie Sanders: 2003 Politician of the Year" 2003).

In the book *Libraries and Democracy* Susan B. Kretchmer states, "Our ideals are entrusted to and manifest in the institutions of our democracy, such as libraries" ("The Library Internet Access Controversy and Democracy" 2001: 97). According to Kretchmer one argument is that the use of filtering software is like "removing a book from the library shelf" (2001: 104). The other argument is that the use of filtering software is "equivalent to the decision not to purchase a book; the Internet is a vast interlibrary loan system and, as a result, blocking software is like a standard decision to selectively acquire certain materials" (2001: 104). Kretchmer

finds the use of “library filtering software” to possibly be “antagonistic to democracy” because the action “essentially strips the responsibility for making decisions and choosing values away from not only the individual, but from the local community as well, and invests that authority instead in unelected corporate entities” (2001: 103). Kretchmer continues:

As our culture and democratic institutions strive to adapt to the Internet, filtering software has emerged as a possible “protection.” Although much discussion has been devoted to what the software can and cannot *do*, and there is general agreement that it is appropriate within one’s home, if one so chooses, and for employees at places of business, little attention has been paid to the more important issue of what the software *means* within our democratic society; what remains to be negotiated is the propriety and significance implicated in the employment of the software in civic forms such as public libraries. The struggle to resolve this issue has highlighters some particularly poignant paradoxical considerations in our democratic values. (2001: 101)

In 1954 Adult Education proponent Lyman Bryson states that libraries “cannot enlarge the knowledge and the self-governing powers of citizens who deny themselves, or who are denied by official authority, the right of access to books which challenge and disturb them” (Rose 1954: xi). The core of the Internet issue, or as Kretchmer puts it, “the most hotly contested aspect” is “the attempt to determine the best way to safeguard the well-being of children as they explore the wonders of the information superhighway (2001: 101).

Internet access is an issue that came up in Don Borcherts’ librarian memoir, *Free For All*. In the mid-1990’s the senior librarian at his branch helped to disable the sound element in the computers when they were installed. However, “because we are the library, we resisted the urge to filter information” (2007: 35). What that means is that Borchert quickly sees “things I never expected to see in the public

library. Video clips of public executions and animals giving birth in the wild. Morgue shots of celebrities...and, oh, the porn” (2007: 35). Borchert reviews the way families came in to get their kids library cards and that they quickly found out how much has changed in the library because of Internet access. He relates a specific example of parents that brought in their young son to help him with his first science project; examining which type of diaper would hold the most urine. Using a library computer they made a quick Google search and ended up with the child viewing “a number of lusty sites where adults wore diapers for, oh, personal satisfaction” (2007: 36). Since “their child was posing questions that he hadn’t the words for yet” the parents came to the librarians who in turn suggested some G-rated books (2007:36).

In 1977 Gordon McShean, a New Mexico librarian, wrote a memoir of fight against censorship called *Running a Message Parlor* and the main focus is over the censorship of children’s books. He calls an exceeding parental fear of the “loss of a child’s innocence” to be a “Santa Claus syndrome” because of “a desperate effort to keep children boxed in to the established mythology”(1977: 156). He states that children shouldn’t be “unnaturally dependant on parental interpretation in coping with ordinary, everyday events” that pertains to sex education because they are, “naturally endowed with an enquiring mind and will grasp such ideas as he or she is ready for *and disregard others*” (1977: 157). As stated by the ALA it is true that “not every book is right for every reader” (*The Huffington Post* 2010). However the larger issue of censorship of the Internet is something McShean did not have to think about. It is a major challenge to censor information taken from online sources. The

problem has to do with the fact that the library selects some books, not all books, for their shelves whereas the amount of information made available online is exponentially larger than what is currently in print.

The issue is not just pornography as the anonymous blogger *Feel Good*

Librarian states in a 2007 post:

I just had woman on the phone this morning who identified herself as the mother of a teen. She wanted to know if children were allowed to come to the library and get on Myspace. When I said yes, she said, "Oh! My! That should be illegal!" Shocked silence on my end, then she said, "Thank you. Goodbye." This literally was the entire conversation. I have no idea what her personal concerns were, what her child is like, what other convictions they may have that are coloring her experiences. But the interaction raised several questions for me, some more difficult to answer than others.

A *Feel Good Librarian* reader named "Cat" commented, "I've had parents call, concerned about the pornographic photos their kids were finding on the web, even though we have a filter...As for advice, there's always the old standby 'If you'd like to monitor what your child sees online, I can pull up another chair for you.' Or something like that (less snotty, of course)." Reader "Harps" added, "I had two librarians (both fairly recent graduates) aghast, saying "what about the children," as if kids can't search YouTube for themselves...Now, here's a case for online information literacy not just for our customers, but for librarians too. We're working on that." How will the issue of censorship cause problems down the line? It may ultimately draw out a social discussion of how much time kids spend at the library without supervision. 1977 McShean stated that the liability "for what a child reads should be primarily a parent's responsibility, with the teacher, the librarian, and perhaps the clergyman in the background to assist" and questioned, "should we

permit government control and regulation of this most intimate part of our lives?

(35)

To some extent public libraries both house and control knowledge. The way in which information is made available to the public is an important issue to the people that run libraries. McShean recalls a confrontation between himself and a patron that asked, “Don’t you believe in any discrimination in the choosing of reading materials?” He replied, “Discrimination in reading is quite different from censorship of one’s reading materials by others—if you don’t know that I feel sorry for you” (1977: 49). McShean stated that, “You can’t learn to discriminate if you have not read good books and bad books” (1977: 49). In what sounds like a post from some of the blogs I researched, McShean finds that in 1977,

There are people who have a vested interest in seeing that the important institutions in America conform to their demands. To them the free access to information is not the safeguard of democracy and the right of the individual, as most of us believe, but is instead an invitation to anarchy. Their distrust of the intelligence of the common man is amazing. Their paranoia over the intentions of the intellectuals in society is devastating. And their trust in ‘big government’ to cure the ills of society—but only certain ills—could be funny if it was not so tragic. (151)

The ALA issued a statement in 1953 that outlines the importance of being able to freely choose reading materials. It is stated that, “We believe that free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society and a creative culture. We believe that these pressures toward conformity present the danger of limiting the range and variety of inquiry and expression on which our democracy and our culture depend” (“Freedom to Read Statement”). McShean takes up that point but states that the public is a necessary participant. “It will take the assistance of the public to change things. Librarians can show the way, but that is all” (1977:

141). Lyman Bryson in the Foreword to *The Public Library in American Life* makes a similar statement: “Librarians, like all good teachers, are bound by their own honesty; they can only open doors and point the way. But unless they can do that there will be only a few accidental triumphs of the free mind in our society” (Rose 1954: xi).

Access For All?

I include two ways that access can be thought of in relation to democracy. The first is in whether or not access exists to a group of people, rural in this case, and the other is when and why access is denied to any individual. I explore the latter with the issue of homelessness and the legal issues that have arisen for librarians in deciding who needs to be asked to leave a public space.

In the 1950’s Ernestine Rose took up the point that many Americans were underrepresented and in her career pushed for a more inclusive library system because, “we are failing to make book service available in all geographic areas” the reason for which is a, “lack of adequate funds, on the basis of a tax possible in poor and scattered areas” and a “lack of administrative organization for coordinating delivery service over areas large enough to spread the tax load necessary for support” (1954: 141). The American South and the southern Mid-West are the regions Rose cites as “the least literate and least privileged” and the same part of the country is experiencing severe underfunding today in relation to Internet access. To Jorge Reina Schement, the author of a chapter in the book *Libraries and Democracy* the issue is that although, “equality of access promises a level playing field, the

promise fails when some Americans lack the knowledge, income, equipment, or training necessary to play the game” (“Imaging Fairness” 2001: 20). One way of interpreting the democratic element of the public library at this time and in this place is to say that since the library depends on tax money for revenue where one lives greatly affects their library access. As the move towards digitalization continues it is worth noting that where one resides may cease to be as important as in the past—in regard to tax support of an actual physical branch space.

Access to the Internet is an important variant and the public library plays a role as it is an important source for free access. Schement points out that, “The founders may have believed that all men are created equal; nonetheless, their elaborate formulations attempting to guarantee equality of access acknowledge their apprehension of the impediments to moving from ideal to reality” (2001: 20). The “disparities” in access could be have been construed by Americans as “God sent, or as nature’s will to reward the fittest” but “the obvious consequences of privilege and exclusion threatened the promise of equal access to the discourses necessary for democratic participation” (Schement 2001: 20). In a *New York Times* article called “Digital Age is Slow to Arrive in Rural America” Kim Severson reports on the stress for some Americans that are, according to one source in Alabama, “trying to pull ourselves into the 21st century” (2011). Severson states that there is a, “line delineating two Americas [that] has become more broadly drawn. There are those who have reliable, fast access to the Internet, and those, like about half of the 27,867 people here in Clarke County [AL], who do not” (2011). Severson notes how the public library fits in to this issue:

Gina Wilson, director of the Thomasville library, oversees 11 terminals with lightning-fast Internet access, paid for with stimulus money. They attract students and the unemployed during the day. At night, people stop by after work to check their e-mail or scroll through Facebook. Mrs. Wilson noticed that after hours, people would pull into the parking lot to try to use the library's wireless signal. So she started leaving it on all night, and plans to post a sign on the door with the password (which, if you are in Thomasville and need to get online, is "guest"). (2011)

Library access for Americans is dependent largely on the socioeconomic status in the community in which one lives. If the free public library had been founded by a nationally supported tax base these issues of equality may have not formulated in the first place. Is this a form of segregation? Some say that a National Digital Library would be the great equalizing answer to this question. Others, as I show at the end of this thesis, believe a digital divide will occur and make access issues more problematic.

Schement traces "equity-as-fairness-as-justice" to "progressive liberal philosophy" that sought a society that "should commit resources to overcome obstacles and barriers experienced by groups in order to maximize their opportunities for access"(2001: 21). Programs that subsidize rural Internet access "establish their political legitimacy by appealing to equity of access as fairness and justice" (2001: 21). While the "desire for equity draws its strength from the same deep source as that which feeds the desire for equality" Schement finds that, "Americans remain ambivalent when asked to endorse policies aiming to achieve equity of access" (2001: 21). Schement states that the only way to achieve a "robust democracy for the information age" is to try and "recognize that democratic discourse ascends from the little things: from wanting the address of a polling station, from sending the mayor an e-mail, from tracking down a footnote—and

from recognizing that access to that discourse is the sine qua non of democratic participation" (2001: 23).

The Legal Issue of Homeless People in the Library

The issue of homelessness came up in the books and blogs I read and the interviews I made. I found one interviewee's response, Julie, a Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) librarian, to be enlightening and frankly, unexpected. In an email she wrote, "what other place can a homeless person go and feel like a peer, like someone *not* needing help, like an equal member in society?" I asked Paula, a bookstore manager and author, if she has ever seen a librarian kick someone out and she said, "I've SEEN someone turn to the librarian and ask to kick someone out" at which point she said, "I left" because "he seemed to be schizophrenic." Jennifer, a 28-year-old screenwriter who writes at the downtown Los Angeles branch, said that, "I think librarians are ok with that [homeless people] I mean if I was a librarian I wouldn't be like 'Dude get out sleep somewhere else.' Probably just leave them alone until the library is closing." When I asked her why homeless people should be welcomed in the library she said, "Where else would they go?" The library is often called a place for all people but homelessness supplies an opportunity to think in terms of a subtext that may exist to this rhetoric. Homeless people do not pay taxes other than sales tax on purchases. Is being a taxpayer the precursor to being a citizen?

The idea of all citizens truly belonging in a place is such a powerful component that makes the library a distinctive place in the United States. Julie gave her opinion about homelessness and the library:

We try to minimize disruptive behavior by all patrons--people are not allowed to fully bathe in the bathrooms, raise a ruckus (crazy or regular), and, if their odor is super bad, we do say something (but not as quickly as I used to in the private sector of a bookstore trying to make money). But, basically, we're a social institution and most of the librarians I know would not discriminate.

As a “social institution” homeless people do end up spending time in the library, particularly since shelters close in the morning and don’t re-open until night. Julie brought up the notorious wildman Los Angeleno author Charles Bukowski—famous for his drunken binges that appear in his book *Barfly*—and asked, “what if they had barred this man from LAPL?!” Bukowski serves as a metaphor for the statement Julie made about all citizens being welcome in a library even though he has never been homeless. Julie’s use of an incredulous “What if?” speaks to the fear of living in a society that downplays the importance of creative output. The issue of homelessness is included in this chapter because of the legal precedence that is being set to determine at what point a person can be asked or made to leave a public space.

Libraries have been sued over people that have been asked to leave or more aggressively, kicked out of this public space, often due to odor. Chip Ward, former assistant director of the Salt Lake City Public Library, states, that “the law is unclear” but that “libraries are learning to write policies on odor that are more specific and so can be defended in court, but such rules are still hard to enforce because smell is such a subjective thing -- and humiliating someone by telling him he stinks is an awkward experience that librarians prefer to avoid. None of this was covered in library school” (“American Gone Wrong: A Slashed Safety Net Turns Libraries Into

Homeless Shelters” 2007). In the article “D.C. Libraries: Not a Homeless Shelter, Especially in the West End” journalist Arin Greenwood explains the legal matter:

The welcome mat comes with a judicial mandate. In 2001, the libraries lost a lawsuit brought by a homeless man, Richard Armstrong, who had been excluded from the MLK library [D.C.] based on his “objectionable appearance.” Armstrong’s exile was part of a systemwide policy in place since 1979 to keep the homeless out. A federal court, however, found that the “objectionable appearance” kicking-outs violated Armstrong’s First and Fifth Amendment rights. The library-access rights of the homeless take on a certain urgency in the summertime, when people who haven’t showered are coming into a small space and other people notice. (2008)

Ward stated, libraries “became very inhibited about banning people for odor, which is probably a good thing...odor is very subjective, and it's hard to enforce a rule that's based on someone's personal preference. And I particularly don't like being stuck in elevators with people who are wearing too much perfume” (2007).

The host of the *Library Law Blog*, Mary, referred to Ward’s article in these comments:

I believe the case he's referring to is the Kreimer case. In that case, the patron won at the district court level, but the library won on the odor issue at the appellate level. This in fact, paved the way for libraries nationwide to recraft their policies using the legal "nuisance" standard (defined by state law - but essentially a high standard such that the odor has to really interfere with the enjoyment and use of the library by others)...My experience is that libraries are generally loathe to tell someone to leave based on odor, but if it's so bad that other users really are not able to use the space, they can and do take action...One innovative approach resulted from a lawsuit in Las Vegas...After a homeless advocacy group filed suit in federal district court in January 1992, officials from Las Vegas-Clark County libraries in Nevada agreed to a consent decree that requires a representative of the advocacy group to be present at a library before a patron can be expelled for offensive body odor. (2007)

Discouragement of the use of a public space, while not a litigious step, can be thought of as acting to circumvent the probability of the presence of homeless people. The role of a librarian in pushing the issue of who belongs in a public space

is highlighted in the following two approaches. A strategy to deter homeless people from congregating in was referred to in the *Washington City Paper* blog this way:

Libraries around the country are doing when faced with this same issue: It put blinds on street-facing windows so that homeless people couldn't sit inside while watching their belongings; it broke up big groups of tables and chairs into smaller conglomerations so that homeless people couldn't congregate en masse as easily; and it allowed users only a little bit of time on the computers at a time. (Greenwood "D.C. Libraries: Not a Homeless Shelter, Especially in the West End" 2008)

Individual librarians still have a say such as Edward Robinson-El, the head librarian of the West End Library in Washington D.C., who does not follow the guidelines listed above. Robinson-El:

Yes we do have a homeless population here...but the way public libraries operate is that we open our doors and whoever chooses to come and use that particular agency or facility is welcome....We have a population that is faithful and loyal. And if you walk around you will see that people are not just lounging around...They're reading. I know because I put back the books that they're reading at the end of the day. They're reading reference material, they're reading the newspapers, they're reading the periodicals. And that's what we want. They're using the library, and that's a good thing." (Greenwood 2008)

The power of a head librarian like Robinson-El to institute policy based on thoughtfulness is reflected in his realistic attitude when he states, "If you elect to work in a public library, you can't be squeamish and you can't say, 'Oh, I wish it smelled like roses every day'" (Greenwood 2008). The idea of a legal precedence is important to note in thinking about the question, Who belongs in the library? The democratic sense of "equality for all" is in a grey area.

Chapter Three: The Public Library as a Community Center

An institution which purports to be of and for the people must reach out to all of them, or risk serving none of them effectively. (Hanna 1978: 121)

In the 1978 book *People Make it Happen* author Patricia Hanna claims that it would be beneficial for librarians to incorporate a “social philosophy” because “like the founding fathers, successful librarians consider public institutions as instruments of social change, or social stability” (1978: 119). The goal is not just one sided service but as a publically funded institution, “it is essential that the community be committed to our institutional goals, so that both financial and moral support may be forthcoming” and this makes the librarian “much more sociologically oriented than formerly” (Hanna 1978: 120-1). One way to think of the role of a librarian as an active part of a community came to light after I introduced myself to a woman after hearing her speak at a Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) rally. Britt is a student in the Library Science Masters Degree program at UCLA and I asked for the single word that, to her, would describe what is important about the public library in the United States. To Britt that word is “community.” She pursued her advanced degree because she “wants to help a community define itself” by creating a strong library to which residents can have a sense of “pride.” Britt, who comes across as bright and idealistic, wants to find employment in a library with lessened resources so that her strong influence will do the most good.

We talked about librarian blogging and she readily offered the name of her own blog, *The Library Moth*. On the blog she calls herself an “activist librarian”

because she is willing to think creatively about finding solutions to help advance the way a community uses the library. She states, “Is there value in telling people about our storytimes and the importance of libraries for their children? Absolutely. Yet there is equal or greater value in *showing* them” (*Library Moth* “Activism and Advocacy” 2011). In a post called “The Gospel of the Library: Targeting a Demographic” she relates the experience of talking with a young man interested in “campaigning for gay marriage” and also “studying the effects of American policy in Central American countries” (2011). The conversation turned to libraries and she explained to him that it is “one of the few egalitarian, non-consumeristic institutions left in America. He was totally amazed. He said something to the effect of, ‘I never even thought about libraries before!’” (2011). Britt states that people who are “already taking steps to be proactive about the kind of change they want in their communities” are an excellent demographic for the library to target because:

Our goals already align with theirs (or our goals align with ours? I know a lot of library students who definitely would fall into this demographic). We just have to tell them about it. So in my traffic-jam brainstorm, I’m going to think about ways to reach out to these people. My immediate thought was to pull on a vintage frock, head to Silver Lake, put on some roller skates, and just talk to people heading to the Saturday flea market. I’ll probably come up with a few things better than this, but the image of roller skate activism is really appealing to me right now. (“The Gospel of the Library: Targeting a Demographic” 2011)

Librarians, and future librarians like Britt, appear to be focused on understanding and drawing out the demographic that surrounds each branch. There seems to be a paradox in a librarian earnestly working hard at attracting the people who live in the neighborhood because they already pay for it through taxes. If they opt to resources could be supported for the people that do value the service. In this

chapter librarians are shown to serve as the conduit that attempts to draw a community together. Scott Douglas wrote the book *Quiet Please* about his time as a librarian in Anaheim, California. Although he enjoyed being a library patron he didn't plan on becoming a librarian until after he had been employed for a few years. His introduction to the profession came from the moment when a co-worker asked, "Ever think of a world without libraries? Ever imagine why a community needs them?" Douglas "shrugged. I hadn't really thought about that" (2008: 26).

Although none of my informants used the term "third place" it is useful to note in this section. A third place denotes a location that is neither one's home nor place of employment. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term twenty years ago in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Oldenburg sites coffeehouses, taverns and bistros as the main area for third place activity because this is "where unrelated people relate" (1989: xi). In Oldenburg's view the diminishment of the third place started when the explosive growth of suburban living started after the end of World War II and "thirteen million plus returning veterans qualified for single-family dwellings requiring no down payments in the new developments" (1989: 3). This "new form of community" created "a safe, orderly, and quiet haven, but it rarely offered the sense of place and belonging that had rooted his [returning veteran] parents and grandparents" (Oldenburg 1989: 4). Because of the rise of the automobile these suburban developments created isolation and a social world that was "easy to leave behind" because "there are no sad farewells at the local taverns or the corner store...there are no local taverns or

corner stores” (Oldenburg 1989: 4). The American way of life is “increasingly privatized and competitive; residential areas are increasingly devoid of gathering places. To the extent of our affluence, we avoid public parks, public playgrounds, public schools, and public transportation” (Oldenburg 2001: 2). What is at stake to Oldenburg is that “the grass roots of our democracy are correspondingly weaker than in the past and our individual lives are not as rich” (1989: xii).

To Oldenburg one of the best third places was the soda fountain because it provided a great “mixing of different kinds of people” and “in 1900 there were about 110,000 of them in the United States, and by 1980 we were down to 150, because the bean counters figured out you can make more money selling greeting cards in that space” (Orsini 2009). In the Introduction to a 2001 book Oldenburg lists the “locally owned, independent, small-scale, steady-state business” as successful third places although “both government and incorporated chain operations have wreaked havoc on them” (2001: 4). What qualifies as a successful third place to the founder of the phrase is clearly precarious because a retailer must curtail their desire to make profits in order to provide community bonding. That is a tall order and one of the reasons I believe that the definition is expanding to include other places.

Oldenburg does not mention a public library as a potential third place because it is dependent on the government for tax support and people need to be able to talk freely and connect, typically with food or drink, in the scenarios he suggests. Librarians and urban planners are starting to position the institution as a potential third place. The Chicago Public Library website refers to its 55 new or refurbished branches as “that special third place” because they are a setting “where

people come to improve their lives, nourish their intellect or simply to be entertained” (2011). Wayne Senville, the editor of the *Planning Commissioners Journal*, asks, “Why shouldn’t public libraries be more highly valued?” to urban planners (“Libraries: at the Heart of Our Communities” 2009: 15). Senville wrote that, the public library “may well be the single most important civic institution in American today” (2009: 17) because it is “really inseparable” from “community” (2009: 19).

The public library is an appealing site to Senville because it provides, “programs, meeting space, computer access, and resources that are responding to a broader array of community needs” (2009: 18). Does computer access provide any type of third place possibility? In 1989 Oldenburg wrote that “the only predictable social consequence of technological advancement is that they [people] will grow ever more apart from one another” (xv). In a 2011 interview with a marketing communication blogger, Oldenburg objects to the “common idea these days that there can be virtual third places, that you can do it electronically. There is no comparison, in my mind, between the joys of getting together, of the face-to-face enjoyment and banter...The problem with so-called virtual third places is that you get like-minded people attracting each other” (Orsini 2011).

I observed an example of how a library could be thought of as a third place one Saturday when I stopped by the Atwater branch and sat at one of the four tables and read for an hour. To my right were two familiar faces, a man in his late 50’s and a woman about ten years older. Over the past year I have seen him on a regular basis reading magazines and newspapers, talking to librarians about books, and

using the computer terminals. I remember him in part because he has a distinctive style—year-round turtlenecks, a Greek fisherman-style hat, thick glasses and a worn leather briefcase. He sits at the same corner table most of the time and I consulted my field notes and found the lady sitting at her same table reading paperback books and the newspaper. My guess is that they only know each other from overlapping visits to the library. On this day she asked him for explicit details on how to log on the library Internet computers. He took about 15 minutes to show her the process at a terminal and then when she sat back down she asked him to repeat the entire order (Him-“Enter your access code” Her-“What is that again?”) so she could write it all down in a small notebook. As tempting as it is to use this as an example of how an older person is trying to adapt to the digital age I think it really has more to do with the fact that she asked another patron for help and not a librarian. Oldenburg would seem to agree on this point because he stated that in the retail sector it is the customers, not the managers or administration, that make a flourishing third place.

Libraries are not often thought of as places for community “banter” but the librarian reference desk is one place where this verbal exchange does exist. It is useful to understand the role of a librarian as a bridge between people and information, whether or not it is in books. Bloggers have fun listing the questions they respond to such as, a man that wanted “*The photo of Jesus*”¹⁴, A tape-recording of the Gutenberg Bible¹⁵, “Where are George Washington’s teeth exhibited? What is a nematode? Who killed Alexander Hamilton?”¹⁶ *Feel Good Librarian* works at a

¹⁴ *Bizarre Questions and What Library School Never Taught You*

¹⁵ *Library Thing*

¹⁶ Seymour *The Changing Role of Public Libraries* 1979: 1

“reference desk of a midwestern library” and has answered telephone calls from people that start with, “the library has never let me down” to which she writes a conspiratorial “uh-oh” to her knowing fellow librarians. Patrons have reportedly asked her about how to get a new kitten out of a hole in their wall, or “Can you tell me if my husband is dead? and “Can you tell me who my husband is?” For this librarian, “sometimes, just figuring out what the question IS is the real job” as in the following post:

A woman called the desk one night. “Can you give me the phone number for that college in Berkeley, California?”

“UC Berkeley? Sure, hold on just a moment while I find it,” I said. This was the question.

“Well, they would have an archeology department, right?”

Ok, maybe not.

“Maybe. Would you like me to try to find their number?”

“Yes, they would deal with linking Egyptian artifacts to DNA, right?”

Ok, the phone number was definitely NOT the question.

“Um, I’m not sure what you mean. Like finding out the cause of King Tut’s death?”

“No, YOU know – tracing living DNA to artifacts.”

“You mean the DNA of a person living right now? To ancient artifacts?”

“Yes! So that you can trace your ancestry.”

Oh. Well, then. Of course. THIS was the question.

“Well, I’m not sure the archeology department would cover that. Wouldn’t DNA fall more into the biology department?”

“Maybe you’re right. Never mind that, can you tell me how people get the Nobel Peace Prize?”

Oh, THIS is the question? “Sure, I can find that out for you.” I began to read her the information off the Nobel website – that a person must be known for their work and contribution to world peace.

“To peace? Can’t it be for other things?” she asked.

“Well, no. Not for the Peace prize.”

“Well, how about the Nobel Peace prize for DNA? I know they have one like that.”

Ok, if this is the question, then I have some serious homework to do. But fortunately, the penny dropped for me ... “Ma’m, I think maybe what you want is the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine?”

“Yes, that’s it. How does someone get that?”

I continued to read from the Nobel website that the prize is awarded for outstanding contributions in the field. The person must be nominated by a professor or scientist from a selected medical academy or university, or by a Nobel laureate.

“You mean I can’t nominate my pastor?”

Voila – that is the question. Finally.

“No, ma’m, unless you are a professor, scientist or Nobel prize winner, I’m sorry, you can’t.”

She sounded fairly cheerful about it. “Well, thank you for all the information. I’m so glad I can call the library and find out things like this, aren’t you?”

You know, maybe THAT is the real question. And I was happy to answer this one:

“Yes. I am.” (“What is the Question?” 2009)

Feel Good Librarian states, “It’s not a part of the job I enjoy, but often the library is one last place to learn about the latest scam. She creatively explained to a patron about a well-known and widespread email swindle attempting to get people to open a bank account in Nigeria based on the belief that the recipient is related to the sender. The post, called “Long Lost Cousins,” has her asking the patron if *they* might be related since she got the same email. The patron was unconvinced and still wanted to proceed. The blogger good-naturedly states, “It is never fun to be the one to pop somebody’s balloon. But I know I did the right thing for that man – and who knows? We might be related, after all.”

A library is the “physical and spiritual” that has “merged and are one” according to Ernestine Rose (1954:4). The influence of architecture was mentioned by my informants and in the several books. In 1954 Rose predicted that in the future, “There may be a reading lounge, or even a smoking lounge, while easy chairs and informally arranged books and magazines offer an invitation to sit or browse.” She felt that, “The ‘silence’ sign may not be replaced by a ‘welcome’ on the mat, but welcome will be implicit in arrangement and reception”(1954: 200). How can a public space welcome residents? In the introduction to his 2007 memoir *Free for All: Oddballs, Geeks, and Gangstas in the Public Library* Borchert calls library buildings, “usually calm and inviting as a warm bath. It is clean, well kept, and quiet enough to

do the Sunday crossword puzzle” (2007: xiii). The thought of a building as an agent of greeting or reception opens up an examination of how this concept is thought to work. In the early days of the public library, architecture was a serious consideration to Andrew Carnegie. On a website about the history of the California Carnegie libraries, architectural studies Professor Abigail Van Slyck calls the style of the Carnegie buildings, built between 1886 and 1917, “familiar as old friends...with classical colonnades supporting triangular pediments and surmounted by domes, they present a face that is immediately recognizable...both conventional and easily anticipated” (“Styles-Carnegie Library Architecture ” 1999). The symmetry of exterior columns “helped identify the building as a public one; readers could enter freely, safe in the knowledge that they were welcome” (Van Slyck 1999).

According to Van Slyck, Carnegie did not hire architects nor make demands except to incorporate the influence of librarian informants who wanted high “efficiency” because “their goal was to allow a single librarian to supervise the entire library” (Van Slyck 1999). Because of this input Carnegie recommended single story buildings with a centrally located information/check out desk giving the librarian “an unencumbered view of the bookshelves lining the perimeter walls” and a “public meeting room” typically located in the basement (Van Slyck 1999). The Carnegie funded Cahuenga branch library where I volunteer fits this description exactly. In fact, the centrality of the main desk made me feel ineffective as an observer since I couldn’t get in that space and was stuck in one of the wings without a way to make a

scan of the whole floor. Using my familiarity with the Cahuenga branch as a guide¹⁷ the placement of the community room in the basement allows for a separate exterior entrance that allows people meeting to enter and exit while the main library area is closed.



Three librarians outside of the Cahuenga branch library of the LAPL in 1917. They are standing directly above the separate basement entrance.

http://www.lapl.org/catalog/photo_collection_overview.html

In *The Library*, author Stuart Murray states, “We recognize the result of good design. It is space that inspires. It is space that reflects a community’s vision of itself and that reinforces connections within and among communities” (2009: 76). The feeling patrons may get from a building range from Paula’s displeasure to Ted’s appreciation. Paula thought that the 1960’s era Glendale library near her house was,

¹⁷ Six Carnegie buildings were funded in Los Angeles between 1913-1916, three of which have been demolished. In addition to the Cahuenga branch the other two are Lincoln Heights and Vermont Square. (carnegie-libraries.org 1999)

“sooo DATED and....it felt kinda claustrophobic.” In a follow up email I asked Paula to clarify what she meant by “dated” and she wrote that she particularly disliked, “the concrete and long skinny windows all around. Ugh. And on the inside, it feels like you've stepped into a time warp.” She has not returned to this branch. Ted finds the new window-heavy modern Silverlake library building itself to give a “neighborhood a sense of class” because “when there is a good library that says to me that this community is a good one as well.” A library’s exterior is an important consideration in these comments for I spent some time in the Silverlake branch, opened in late 2009, and realized that it wasn’t just the soaring ceilings and expansive computer space that made the bookshelves seem smaller. On my next visit I brought a tape measure. Indeed the space for browsing books is smaller than the previously built branches at 36.5 inches wide while Atwater library, built in 1989, has 40-inch wide book stacks. The measurement is from shelf to shelf so the inches represent the space that is available for people to browse. 3.5 inches may not seem like a substantial amount but the slightly more cramped feeling immediately registered to me because to pass another patron one is much closer that is typically comfortable. The feeling in the Silverlake stacks is of being in a book storage area as opposed to a breezy place for comfortable meandering. There are low couches and desks for patrons with their own laptops, with plenty of power outlets, as well as pods of computer stations.

Other than books, computers, other lending materials like DVD’s, and reference desk, what is going on in a library? The first part of this chapter examines four issues relating to community: the impact of free classes and lectures, children

in the library, sharing a public space with homeless patrons, and an explanation of an issue that affected LAPL funding. The manner in which residents, journalists and politicians used the framework of community in their political discourse is examined in the latter part of the chapter.

A Historic Shift Towards More Activities

In 1954 Ernestine Rose wrote an entire chapter called “Library and the Community” and little mention is made of any community activities, such as language classes or craft projects, that one finds in the modern library. For Rose, the chapter is about the importance of supplying the types of books that will appeal to the wider community of “our foreign-born” (1954: 41) or increasing the availability of books to “the sick in hospitals or at home, the blind, those in prison, and also the aged...” (1954: 43). Rose does mention the use of things like classes and “little theater groups” as a promising “social program” that could, “possibly lead to a type of library activity...which would be as alien to the thought of the nineteenth-century librarian as the idea of open shelves would have been to a medieval ‘keeper of manuscripts’” (1954: 47). In the book *People Make it Happen* author Patricia Hanna states that the most important undertaking is to “find out what one’s community is really about” and which activities could benefit residents (1978: 7). To Rose in 1954, Hanna in 1978, and Britt in 2011, the rhetoric of being useful to the residents that surround a library is equally apparent with differences in approach.

Hanna solely focuses her study on the Howland Library in New York State. On one day of Hanna’s visit the library hosted a class on Transcendental Meditation,

a needlework class, and a hundred middle school kids watching a film. A reporter observing the activities asked a librarian, “if there was any pie the library didn’t have a finger in. The answer was, ‘Not if we can help it’” (Hanna 1978 :1). Hanna asks, “Why so? Why are librarians all over the country sponsoring belly dancing classes and plant exchanges and bike-repair workshops?” (1978: 2). Hanna questions if, “it [is] worth the planning time or the effort of setting up these programs, just on the off chance that two or three people will stop on the way out to look at a book? Or is the answer that getting people into the library for any reason at all is now an end in itself?” (1978: 2) Other than lectures, book clubs or places for political meetings and voting, very little information existed in my research to show that the library was a location for expanded community activities before the 1970’s. In 1978 Hanna questions the validity of working hard at planning an activity in order for the payoff of a patron acquiring a book.

A method for acquiring knowledge about one’s community is explained in a 1971 article called “Tomorrow’s Illiterates” by Don Roberts. It is suggested that if library workers care about “community knowledge transfer” they should become a “librarian-hustler” (Roberts 1971: 299). This is someone willing to “hit the street” taking “the risks of real personal involvement and unusual hours” in order to find out more about the community and how it could be better served (1971: 299). On “the streets” a library worker can distance themselves from “institutional behavior (i.e., activities which look good on monthly reports)” by working with people on a “one-to-one or small group basis” (1971: 299). Roberts cites two examples, “putting on overalls so that information can be exchanged” with perhaps a construction

worker, and “going around at the crack of dawn with a voter registrar as she or he contacts people who are on their way to the bus” (1971: 299). An example of the connectivity of the “librarian-hustler” approach is to become “multilingual” by learning, “computer language, street language, English as a second language, foreign languages, the languages inherent in media productions and use, and the ever-changing English Language” (Roberts 1971: 301). Hanna agreed with the suggestion and stated that, “the appropriate patois might be, at any given moment, teen-age talk, professional jargon...or Puerto Rican English” (1978: 122). Not just *sensing* what the community needs from a branch but trying to actively create a communication bridge between workers and potential patrons is an example of how Hanna claimed that the library was becoming more sociologically influenced.

Contemporary Community Activities in the LAPL

The LAPL was created in 1872 and with 73 branches in 2011 it is one of the largest publicly funded libraries in the world. The Mission Statement is given as the following: “The [LAPL] provides free and easy access to information, ideas, books and technology that enrich, educate and empower every individual in our city's diverse communities” (Mission Statement- “About the Library” 2010). In a web article Katherine Manderfield states that, “while Facebook and Twitter have revolutionized the way people communicate, they’ve also diverted a basic human need for organic social engagement and that “authentic community participation” can exist from attending library classes and events because “there are people beyond the screen, and perhaps next door, with whom we might find far more

satisfying connections” (“Library Lover’s Month” 2011). What Manderfield states is very similar to the “face to face” ideal of Oldenburg’s third place construct.

In the LAPL system, due to the widespread prevalence of neighborhood branches, “no institution has a greater impact than the Los Angeles Public Library” because the institution “makes an intelligible impression on each of the neighborhoods it serves. This impact transcends free access to information—a Library hallmark—and strikes at the heart of many other needs of our community” (Library Foundation 2009: 2). In a typically month an LAPL branch will have at least one children’s story hour, book club, computer class and used book sale. Public libraries are also the site of Adult Literacy and English as a Second Language programs. Volunteers are trained and assigned a student with whom they make weekly arrangements to meet and work at their own pace using workbooks that are distributed by a LAPL coordinator. Other than these activities what follows is a list of events offered in late March to April 2011 with the purpose of giving an idea of how librarians work at covering the socioeconomic and multicultural demands of a diverse demographic such as Los Angeles. The footnotes are alphabetized based on branch locations along with my own contextualizing information having spent time in each neighborhood.

A partial list of LAPL classes offered in the Spring of 2011:

Soap Making, Poetry Slam, Creating Pom Pom Animals, Wii games, Earth Day is Every Day, a celebration of the “Hanshi “Cold Foods” Festival from China with traditional folktales, games and other exciting activities for kids and families,” Poetry Word Jazz,¹⁸ Library Web Tools and the Internet, Desktop Publishing Basics, a series of visits from an artist associated with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) who will lead activities in, “LACMA Teen Art” and “LACMA Art Class for

¹⁸ Angeles Mesa, in Leimert Park neighborhood: African American middle to upper middle class

Kids and Families,”¹⁹ Scrabble Club, Credit Repair Workshop, Teen Craft Day and Teen Games Day, a play for “ages ten and up” about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster,²⁰ Introducción a las computadoras de LAPL, Mejore su crédito, Landlord-Tenant Issues [listed in English and for another meeting time, in Spanish], Life Story Writing, a talk called Celebrities, Chocolate, Chihuahuas, etc. -- What Mexico Has Given the US,”²¹ Lecture from Nina Byers, Professor Emeritus and Research Professor at the UCLA Department of Physics and Astronomy, Passover Festival, Stamp Club, Bubblemania: “See rainbow bubbles, square bubbles, bubbles in bubbles and even a kid in a bubble!,”²² English Conversation, Family Origami Time, Citizenship, SAT Practice Test for Teens, Computer Class in Vietnamese, Chinese-English Bilingual Storytime, Easter Bunny and Crafts,²³ Quilting Hour, Anime/Manga Club, Email Class—“Hands-on training on creating free e-mail accounts, sending, checking and replying to messages,”²⁴ Where Did My Money Go? Managing Debt and Building Wealth, ACT practice test for teens, Teen Poetry/Open mic night in association with National Poetry Month, Favorite Folk Songs,²⁵ Multiple Sclerosis Support Group,²⁶ Candy Making,²⁷ Opera for Kids,²⁸ A listing written in Japanese [I asked the head librarian via email to translate: “Japanese language book club-meet fellow readers and enjoy lively discussions. New members welcome”,²⁹ Rubber Ducks—“Deirdre Rosato, a member of the Friends of the Mid-Valley Regional Branch Library will display her collection of rubber ducks collected from all over the country,”³⁰ Martial Arts,³¹ The History of Jews in China, The Cinematographer’s Craft, a class for teens interested in how to perform film stunts,³² Knitting Circle, Mah Jongg, Yoga, Chess, For Teens: “Yu-Gi-Oh! Trading Cards,” Origami, a Spring Egg Hunt,³³ Decluttering Workshop, Thinking About Capitalism, Book Club- *The Bacchae* by Euripides,³⁴ Saltwater Fishing,³⁵ How to Discipline Children Without Punishing Them” taught by a “Transpersonal Psychologist, Holistic Healer, College Instructor, a wife and a mother of two toddlers,”³⁶ Poetry reading, Guitar, Crochet, Science

¹⁹ Arroyo Seco, in Highland Park: hipsters and musicians

²⁰ Atwater, northern Los Angeles near Griffith Park: sidewalks with cafes and young families

²¹ Benjamin Franklin, in Boyle Heights: primarily Latino working class families

²² Brentwood, in West Los Angeles: upscale Caucasian

²³ Chinatown, near Downtown Los Angeles: well established Chinese neighborhood

²⁴ Eagle Rock, far eastside: a neighborhood with multicultural demographic and the fairly recent establishment of itself as a destination for dining and shopping

²⁵ Encino Branch, city of Tarzana in the San Fernando Valley: becoming demographically more Iranian-American with popular Persian shops and restaurants, also the Northern end of bohemian Topanga Canyon

²⁶ Fairfax Branch, centrally located: on the southern edge of a neighborhood known for a high concentration of Orthodox Jewish inhabitants

²⁷ John C. Fremont, centrally located: middle class neighborhood with 1920’s bungalows

²⁸ Granada Hills, San Fernando Valley: suburban, north side of the area, upscale

²⁹ Little Tokyo Branch, part of downtown Los Angeles: bustling area with Japanese boutiques, galleries, restaurants, and schools

³⁰ Mid-Valley Regional, San Fernando Valley

³¹ North Hollywood, San Fernando Valley: gentrified area with a large metro station

³² Northridge, northern San Fernando Valley: multicultural and socioeconomic area

³³ Memorial Branch, in centrally located Los Angeles, bordering both upscale Hancock Park and middle to upper middle class Chinese Mid-City

³⁴ Palms Rancho Park, west Los Angeles, south of UCLA: upper middle class

³⁵ Playa Vista, beach neighborhood with tourist restaurants and upscale homes

³⁶ Robertson Branch, west side Los Angeles: upscale shopping and dining area

Experiments for Kids,³⁷ Career Summit, Job Clinic, Movie in the Afternoon Club—"The Social Network,"³⁸ Sustainable Saturdays: A Savvy Homeowner's Introduction to Energy Upgrades, Silver Lake History Collective, Basic Stock Investing, Reading is Magic! with [magician] Tony Daniels,³⁹ Henna Program—"Russell Chan will discuss the history of henna and offer attendees a chance to use it. Parental "OK" is suggested," Myths about College Admissions, Knitting for Those in Need,⁴⁰ Animal Rescue: Dogs,⁴¹ French Conversation, Resume Workshop, Social Media 101, Finance and Investing for Young Teens, Finance and Investing for Older Teens,⁴² Weekly meetings called "Community Information Forum" in which, "Representatives from the Watts Social Security Office will answer questions and assist patrons with applications for Social Security."⁴³ (Locations and Hours-"About the Library" 2011)

Events, such as yoga or chess, which appeared more than once, were not repeated. As previously mentioned, book clubs exist on a regular basis but I specifically named *The Bacchae* by Euripides because it is such a noteworthy and ambitious choice of literature, which reflect the inhabitants of the wealthy area in which the library is located. It is no surprise that places like Silverlake with an established interest in green living have classes on sustainability, while an area such as Boyle Heights with large populations of newly arrived Mexican and Central American immigrants have classes listed on renter's rights. As a whole, this list provides an opportunity to think about the way a library addresses the needs of the members of the surrounding community with activities beneficial to each specific demographic. Why is it a goal to attempt to match people to an activity? Hanna suggests that the use of the ubiquitous community room that is "idle much of the

³⁷ San Pedro, beach neighborhood close to Long Beach

³⁸ Sherman Oaks, San Fernando Valley: upscale established neighborhood and a shopping destination

³⁹ Silverlake, east Los Angeles: upscale creative people with interest in modern architecture

⁴⁰ Studio City, San Fernando Valley: mixed use, high rise apartments and large houses in an established middle-class area

⁴¹ West Los Angeles Regional Branch

⁴² Westwood: an upscale area around UCLA

⁴³ Alma Reaves Woods-Watts, in South Central Los Angeles: considered a gang ridden neighborhood and financially downtrodden

time” may help draw in “all sorts of people find out where their library is and what it looks like inside” leading to an opportunity to create patrons (1978: 2). This implies that a patron is truly formed when they use the library for materials that can be checked out.

A library can also be a neutral site for a community to simply come together. Hanna reports that during the Spring of 1977 the community she observed experienced “racial tension” that was exasperated by “a shooting and a bottle throwing incident and a fire bombing of the local office-supply store” (1978: 118). The Howland Library showed open to the public films on Monday evenings and they were urged by city officials to cancel the event that was set to occur a few days after the incident. The head librarian refused and the film (“King Kong”) was shown to:

A full house composed of Black, white, and Puerto Rican adults, teenagers and children. Halfway through, the projectionist opened the back door to let some cool air into the room, and a group of young people sauntered in from the street and stationed themselves against the walls. When the movie ended, without incident except for some apparently good-natured jostling among the latter and the noisy reaction of the children to the gorilla’s plunge from the Empire State Building, a woman whom the librarian could not remember having seen before commented, ‘Well, someplace in town can do it, anyway.’ (Hanna 1978: 118)

The library, has a balance between control, because public employees are watching, and freedom, in which anyone is allowed in without identification, is perhaps a unique site in the social life of a community. By contrast, a municipal park has a higher level of freedom and a public school has a higher degree of control.

The third place concept separates work and home but to some of my informants the public library is considered an excellent site for working on writing. Ted, the book publisher and author, goes to the newest branch of the LAPL, the

modern Silverlake branch primarily to “rent DVD's” and write on his laptop. Ted thinks of the public library as a “sort of a public office space.” He states that “as long as you are quiet” the library is an excellent place for members of the community to collectively work. Ted thinks that this description works on a global level because to him a library is, “the one institution that is basically the same from culture to culture.” When Ted was writing a book in London he liked to, “go to the local Islington branch and work for four hours a day. It was a discipline thing and the library was the perfect location to work in.”

Jennifer, a freelance screenwriter, returned to Los Angeles after her graduation from college and noticed a difference in the use of this shared public space: It is “mostly hipsters in their late 20s or early 30s working on their scripts on their laptops using the free Internet. I have to say I might also fit in that category.” Librarian Julie backed up Jennifer’s assessment of scriptwriting in the LAPL in an email where she reflected, “funny enough, with wireless, we're getting more of the educated elite in the libraries--the yuppies writing screenplays, etc.”

In piece called “Library Lovers Month” author Katherine Manderfield calls the branches of the LAPL “among the only free sanctuaries left in LA” because going there one can avoid, “crescendoing alt-rock at Starbucks, solipsistic neighbors, and the come-hither look that a turned-off television can sometimes sport” (2011). To Manderfield, “an institution that holds quietude as a virtue is simply invaluable” (2011). Ted describes the distinctive nature of a public library as “a special area where you can't be really social. There is a great deal of mediation that takes place and I like the aspect that one doesn't really communicate with others - at least chit-

chat wise.” There is an unwritten American societal rule, perhaps enforced by the “shushing” old maid librarian stereotype, that a public library is not a spot for talking to strangers. In all my trips there, as a researcher, patron, and volunteer I can report to have rarely seen a person strike up a conversation with another or to speak loudly on the cell phone.

Celia, a social media coordinator, goes to the library as a weekly errand to pick up books she arranged to have held at her favorite branch. She works from home and has considered the library as a work site but, unlike Ted and Katherine Manderfield, she avoids the library as a workplace “because I don’t like other peoples noise but I see tons of people in there using...their own laptops. And I think it is because it is free access to the Internet.” Jennifer thinks that libraries are good places for work because “they frown on the talking” and reports “feeling more productive in the library.” At home Jennifer states, “one thing leads to another and nothing gets done, whereas at the library, god forbid you make eye-contact with anyone across the table from you. You have to focus on your little personal bubble. Whatever it is.”

Paula, a bookstore manager with a master’s degree in French Literature, likes to focus on her serious genealogy hobby at the LAPL central branch downtown and “work there for hours.” In a follow up to our interview I asked Paula to speak more about why she uses the library for genealogy research and she said that the “biggest reason” is that “much of their enormous collection can't be checked out and isn't online.” Paula told me that, “I like physically looking at the books. Sometimes when you're doing research like that, you are looking for one thing and stumble on something

else by accident. Here's an example: I remember looking at a book on Washington state, where my dad is from. There was a bit in it that I wanted to see on my great-great grandfather. There was tons of information on his neighbors, and it helped me get an idea of what life was like in Walla Walla then. I never would have found that on a computer because I wasn't looking for that sort of information."

In his closing pages Scott Douglas recounts going to a library where he has never worked and no one knows him. He wants to plug in his computer and the "stereotypical librarian—ugly, clunky glasses, hair in a tight bun" tells him that he has to supply his own power. He states:

The library was everything that was wrong with the modern library. It was not equipped with computers, there was no room for study groups, and no food or drinks were allowed. Fifty years ago libraries had no competitors. There were bookstores here and there but people went there to buy books; they did not go there for group study...there are few libraries that serve food and drink and I can't figure out why. (2008: 286)

Douglas continues by saying, "Libraries need to change, just like everything else does. They need to serve drinks, but the needs go deeper than that" (2008: 287).

Ted, the book publisher, made a similar comment in an email prior to our interview:

The Borders [bookstore, now closing] down the street from them doesn't feel....like anything living. It had a lot of senior citizens sitting in their favorite chairs reading the papers there for free. And all that does is make me think 'why not do that at the library?' And on top of that when are libraries are going to have bars? Cocktail hour with a book in the hand in a well-lighted and safe location - is that not heaven?

I am thinking where all those old people are going to go now? They should have gone to their local library instead! It serves the same purpose. But also cafes that was once open to the laptop generation now wants to close that service - because so many of the customers buy or nurse one cup of coffee and spend the whole day there hogging their table. Again the library is the perfect place for the laptop generation. Why the library hasn't focus on this particular generation is a mystery to me - as well as for old people to read in public spaces.

I think the local library should stay open late and have a wine bar attached to it. I can't tell you how many times where I just want to have a drink in a bar and read. I

don't want to chit-chat, but sit in a well lighted (not too bright) place and have a glass of wine or two. That would be heaven! I think the library can supply that.

It sounds outlandish to combine books and expensive computer equipment with potentially damaging drinks and food but it appears that this is a growing trend being hotly debated. Similar policy changes are being taken in England. Fiona Hamilton in which she states, "Public libraries are dropping their hallowed rule of silence and other rigid protocols in order to revive their falling membership. Patrons will be allowed to talk on mobile phones, bring food and drink, play on computer games and watch football matches" ("Public Libraries Open Way for Drinks, Snacks, Mobiles" 2008).

Children and Young People in the Library

In 2010-2011 Los Angeles, "90,000 young people, or 15,000 students a day, visit one of the city's 73 libraries every week" (MacDonald "City of Airheads" 2010). Author Susan Patron said that children in the LAPL, "have little say in their quality of life; they entrust that to us" ("Keep the Library Doors Open" 2011). The separateness of space for children in a public library was a Carnegie influence. Van Slyck reports that Carnegie libraries uniformly included a children's reading room so that this group could experience, "a portion of the public landscape that catered directly to their needs" (1999). The considerations go beyond child sized tables or colorful drawings on the wall in the case of Jennifer's belief that there are "many clerks watching you" and guarding the space for children's use only. She recalled finding an open seat with an outlet for her laptop in the children's area and "as soon as I

opened my computer a clerk said ‘this is the children’s section no laptops allowed’ and I was like, this is weird. I said ‘this outlet is the only outlet with a table’ and she said no.”



Children’s Book Reading on the grounds of the Memorial Branch Library. Photo by author

Ted grew up being taken to the library on a regular basis by his well-known artist parents who let him explore and roam around looking for things of interest. He recalls being interested in the accessibility and the visual intrigue of the children’s sized furniture as a particular highlight. Patron, a children’s book author, said that the library provides, “lasting benefits for children” (“Keep the Library Doors Open” 2011). Ted seems to agree with that idea when he states that having gone to the library as a child, “pretty much made me the man I am now. I learned a lot of stuff

via the library system. Also read a great deal of books that I couldn't find via the commercial market." Paula feels that having a "friendly space for kids" is one way to attract more people to the library and that kids need a space "to spread out and be comfortable." She recalls, from her childhood in Georgia, checking out "STACKS and stacks" of books and she "really just liked that me and my mom went together."

From her earliest memory Jennifer used to "beeline it to the children's section. And uh, grab maybe two piles of books and wait for my sister who would take hours" because "she was just starting to get crazy about the Beatles. She would ravage the biography and music sections." Jennifer grew up using the LAPL Los Feliz branch and laughingly recalled picking up *Crime and Punishment*, because the "'I'm going to be well read' thing kicked in...and I read a few pages and stopped." The attempt at reading a Dostoyevsky classic was an occasion for Jennifer to exhibit "really great posture" before she gave up and went "to the graphic novel section. Picking up some old Spider Man or something." I spoke to Rita, the LAPL volunteer coordinator, about her childhood library memories from when she "ran away to the library and then I got homesick and I went home." My favorite part of speaking with Rita was when she explained her early love of the library because she "grew up in Venice [California] and I would go to the library after school and I would come home with a stack of books...and I was definitely a reader."

Young people, unaccompanied by their parents or guardian, are an important factor in this section. Librarian Borchert imagines that his former co-worker, elderly Gudrun would object to the "latchkey kids who come into the library right after school and stay until six or seven at night" (2007: 26). He continues, "When a child is

dropped off for that many hours, it's free day care, pure and simple...there are adults in charge, and there are clean restrooms" (2007: 27). Borchert points out that while parents may think their child will cut a "dazzling high-profile swath through school" by spending so much time near books "there's a wrinkle. We don't make them do homework" (2007: 27). Thesedays Gudrun times her visits so that she misses the drastic afternoon post-school change in "activity level" because Borchert thinks that to a woman with such delicate sensibility toward the public library, "this is not something she wants to witness. To her, this would be like watching an anaconda swallow a baby rabbit." (2007: 28) Gudrun prefers to be, "checked out, in her car, windows rolled up, far away when the first shock waves of children hit the front door of the library" (2007: 28) because in her memory "children were never left unattended, and the libraries were always...quiet. Clean. Civil" (26). Borchert thinks Gudrun, and other librarians from previous generations, would "rather remember the library as a place of innate nobility and literacy, and would rather remember the children in her mind the way they used to be, not the way they seem to be now" (2007: 28).

While I have certainly witnessed the influx of young people in my local branch after school lets out the kids seem to get right down to homework. The noise level didn't change too much but the lateness of the unaccompanied children did stick out in my library experience. One evening around 8:00 I left to walk home at the same time as two boys around the age of eight and ten reacted to a text and grabbed their backpacks and rushed out to jump into a idling double-parked minivan. I asked Jennifer about who goes to the library she said, "I think um, with

the smaller branches, kids right after school. Waiting for their parents to pick them up.” This is one way that a segment of the community uses the library because there is a perception of safety for children.

Blogger Brian Herzog who calls himself the “Swiss Army Librarian,” wrote a 2009 post titled, “Top 10 Patron Pet Peeves.” While his top ten is pretty standard for anyone who has worked in public service; improper cell phone usage, not saying thank you, poor closing time etiquette, there are 45 responses from other librarians and a few patrons. Many of the posts complain about children in various states and levels of parental control. Kristin said:

I love reading these comments, but I think that my biggest pet peeve is parents who want everything. I always get, “don’t you provide supervision?” or “can you just watch my kids for a minute?” Does this look like a daycare? Then after we have a program for 300 kids, I always have the parent who asks, “aren’t you doing a craft today?” I just don’t have the resources to cut out 300 bunnies or whatever for every program. The kids are always happy, and so fun to work with, why can’t the parents be happy?

The mechanism of blogging and reader response is revealed in this conversation between blogger and respondent. Kristin gives an obvious undercurrent of frustration, which surely comes from being a public employee and working with children—two places in which criticism is considered socially unwelcome. The anonymous blog *The Society for Librarians Who Say Motherfucker* published a 2011 post called “Smells Like Teen Mofo” that is impossible to imagine coming from a librarian’s mouth in person:

Dear gangly, fidgety, mouthy, arrogant, entitled student who only ever uses the library as a place to play games and music and put your dirty shoes on the furniture...oh yeah, and eat your lunch... and talk on your cell phone to someone ten feet away...What part of STFU don't you understand?

On a gentler note Herzog writes weekly about his favorite reference question he encountered. One blog post explained how a young person getting math tutoring in his branch asked to borrow a protractor and although, “requests like this aren’t a problem – we have lots of school tools and office supply stuff that we let people use all the time,” but there wasn’t one at that moment. Herzog found a printable online version of the tool and gave it to the child who liked it so much she took it to use in class. Herzog ends the post by giving himself the “homework is to go to the dollar store to get a protractor to leave at the Reference Desk” (2011). The world of librarian bloggers and readers is, like in most Internet cases, an international forum. The first reader comment is from the Netherlands and states that students in his part of the world, “use what we call a geodriehoek (geotriangle). It has the protractor incorporated” and includes a link for a printable version of that device. The next comment is from Dan, a librarian that had been asked by a patron for help with a pdf file that wouldn’t print:

And then Brian you are not going to believe this...When I went over to see what it was that she was trying to print, it was a PROTRACTOR. Now, it wasn’t the same protractor that you found. Instead of Googling “protractor” I Googled “Swiss Army Librarian” and viola. Done. Customer happy. I haven’t had anyone ask for a protractor in years. This is the first time I’ve ever seen anyone try to print one. Weeeeeeeeeird. (2011)

It is unclear, but doubtful if Dan knows Herzog but the familiarity is apparent. This chapter is about community and although the stories are useful in relation to young patrons, I didn’t know that school or office tools could be borrowed at a library, it also allows for a broadening of what community is all about. Because of blogs, a librarian may experience a community that is bigger than their neighborhood, state

or country. Support, ideas and general exchanges are supported by the blogosphere. In article “Diaries, On-Line Diaries, and the Future Loss to Archives; Or, Blogs and the Blogging Bloggers Who Blog Them” blogs are thought to “reveal shifts in cultural norms of privacy and ideas of community” and the communication between this blogger and reader illustrates this idea (O’Sullivan 2005:69).

Herzog relates another noteworthy exchange between a child and a librarian that he overheard at his branch. The child’s request was to find information on “the giant colossal squid.” The librarian attempting to dig up a book struggled with the request and the child’s mother walked up and said, Oh, don’t worry – he only learned about it in a movie he watched last night. The “giant colossal squid” isn’t actually a real animal” (2011). Herzog states, “This is why I love librarians – who else would work this hard just because a child was curious about something? Actually, now I’m kind of curious which movie it was this patron watched. Hmm” (2011). The connectivity of librarian blogging is revealed in a reader’s comment from Amy:

This is not quite true. There is such a thing as the giant squid (*Architeuthis*) and the colossal squid (*Mesonychoteuthis hamiltoni*). Not much is known about them since they appear rarely, but the boy would have been overjoyed to get this information and a book for his age group was published pretty recently called *Here There Be Monsters: the Legendary Kraken and the Giant Squid*. There may be other works, but I don’t know if they are age appropriate. (2011)

Herzog replies with gratitude and adds, “Another person (thank you Jim) sent me a link to <http://squid.tepapa.govt.nz>, the Colossal Squid exhibition at the Museum of New Zealand, which differentiates between the giant squid, colossal squid, and octopus” (2011). Librarians not only use blogs for “venting” in the way Johnson

claims but for a system of internal regulation and education between fellow workers. They understand the joys and hardships of a specialized job but it seems they almost can't help themselves for correcting others, as Amy does, although it is in a way that is helpful.

Patron wrote that the elements that she finds important in a library are, "open doors...big ideas...[and] a welcoming refuge for every kid in every neighborhood" ("Keep the Library Doors Open" 2011). Patron's inclusion of "every kid" clearly extends to teenagers and programs and activities such as SAT practice sessions are focused towards this age group. Librarians wonder where the young people who are troubled, often underprivileged, and restless will go when library hours are cut back or branches aren't open. Journalist Patrick Range MacDonald quotes librarian Elyse Barrere, a former librarian in South Central and now at the Atwater Village Branch, as saying, "The library was a neutral territory where the gangs didn't really come in. It makes me worry about them. It could be a very bad situation" (2010).

For three years I have volunteered at the East Hollywood Cahuenga Branch. High school aged kids start coming in the branch after school lets out and from what I have observed the library offers a safe haven for this group to work on homework and read quietly. Some members of this group sit at open tables waiting for one of the two 15-minute computers to become available. There are no chairs for these stations and the 8-10 people waiting typically do not have any reading materials in front of them as they wait. LAPL Internet computers are typically reserved up to 24 hours in advance for a one-hour session. The library card number used for the

reservation is the only one to unlock the computer during a ten-minute grace period. The 15-minute computers do not accept reservations and one doesn't need a library card to use them. This is another place to consider the issue of community because the facilities are different in each socioeconomic area. The opposite of what currently exists, and I argue a more fair system, would be that poor East Hollywood or Boyle Heights would have ample computer space while upscale Pacific Palisades or Brentwood, places where residents have iPhones and other access to the Internet including home offices, would have fewer computers.

I witnessed a fatal shooting between two teenage boys one the sidewalk outside the Cahuenga library grounds while I was outside tutoring my ESL student. I ride my bike to the sessions and it was locked up outside the main doors. A familiar male librarian raced out and told me to unlock it quickly before the crime scene tape went around that part of the building. At the time, and under such duress, I didn't think much about his advice except appreciation that he remembered my mode of transport. It wasn't until a month later when I was chatting with the librarians and I mentioned that I had been there the day that the shooting happened and one of them asked, "Which one?" that I realized the familiarity with violence some of these workers have. The police cordoned off the library parking lot, including workers' vehicles, for 24 hours according to one person I spoke with. What Barerre refers to, as a potential "very bad situation," is a lack of other places that qualify as "neutral" or non-gang related. It is not just that underprivileged children in Los Angeles can use library computers but also that the building can act as a welcoming spot for

several hours of afterschool time. Young children and their sanctioned reading rooms are an easy and uncomplicated point of pride for a library.

Teenagers, especially the ones I have observed at Cahuenga, seem to be a group of people that a community is collectively concerned about. Celia stated that libraries are excellent places for young people “to focus and get [their] shit together.” But what if the patrons are not working or reading but sleeping or staring off into space? Is there a hierarchy of use in which the dazed looking bookless Cahuenga branch teens come out as low status and the kids who show up for a class on “Finance and Investing for Older Teens” in Westwood are high status? With subdivisions based on neighborhood needs, as shown in the community activity list, there is little platform to process this issue of status. The next section analyzes another group that brings up status issues.

Homelessness and the Library

When I moved to Los Angeles I found a library on the route from my apartment to my new job and planned a visit for an early morning before work. When I arrived at the Hollywood Regional Branch Library I was astounded at the dozens of homeless people, easily around 50, that flooded through the doors as the library opened, rapidly making their way to the available tables and chairs. I watched the group getting settled for about 15 minutes and it seemed it was clear that certain people had specific areas designated for their use on that day. I ride the bus and subway and I’m far from sheltered but that this scene is still vivid in my

mind. In this location, on that day, I understood why the issue came up so often in my interviews and other resources.

A Library Primer, written to teach early library management skills, also includes the statement that comfortable armchairs are not desirable because they “appeal to loafers” which points to the fact that in the early days of American libraries there was a fine line between just hanging out in a library and using it to better oneself (Murray 2009: 187). One hundred years after the publication of Dana’s book the modern American library now faces the issue of accommodating homeless people. Ted, a 50-year-old owner of a publishing company, stated that:

Homeless people [are] a huge community if one [can] call it a community. It is always a hard question for me, because some of them are total crazy people, some are just out of a job, some are [on] drug or alcoholics, some are people who just want to sleep under the stars. So far in my experience the library space is never taken over by one specific grouping. There is a code of respect that you don't bother the other person.

Early in my research I conducted an interview with a Los Angeles librarian that spoke of the support she feels for homeless people. She stated that, If they go to a “shelter, clinic, government aid office, street corner to beg it's because they're saying to the world they are on the skids” but in a public library, “they can walk in, ask for the newspaper, check their email, read about other lives--they can choose to interact with librarians or they can just come and go. I think libraries are places for the homeless to recapture their respect. God that's important!” Communicating with this librarian was early in my research and I anticipated that she would be frustrated with the extra work of paying attention to a potentially troublesome person. This may have to do with the fact that I work in an independent bookstore

on Sunset Boulevard—an area known for its mixture of wealthy people double-parking their Rolls-Royce vehicles while making multiple thousand dollar purchases and people that sleep around the store every night. She mentioned that she does have to “say something” to discourage bad behavior but that would take place, “not as quickly as...in the private sector of a bookstore trying to make money.”

I asked Rita if the library was still the welcoming place of her youth and she said, “I’m not sure...anymore. I’m speaking very frankly because of some of the homeless people go to the library. There are so many of them in L.A. and...I wouldn’t [laughing dismissively] let my children go there. Unless I went with them.” Later she quietly stated that, “on the other hand it gives them [homeless] some place to go. And that is something that society as a whole should be aware of.” I asked her if she thought there were more challenging people around in general and she said “there used to be social programs to help them and at a certain point the programs were discontinued and the people were thrown on the street. Really have no place else to go. The library provides a safe place for them to come in and sleep and use the restroom.” In general Rita finds that, for her taste, there are “too many weirdoes. Especially in West L.A.,” indicating the area in which she grew up.

The intersecting issues of children’s safety and homelessness was further revealed in a radio show called “Talk of the Nation” in which listeners call in and ask questions. Host Neal Conan, asked caller “Susan” if she was “concerned when you take your child to the library? Are you concerned for her safety?” to which she replied, “well, yes. I don’t leave her alone, even though she’s 13. But it’s not because I’m against the homeless. It’s because I have a mental health background. I’m an art

therapist. I've worked with people with mental health issues, and, you know, they aren't always predictable" (2011).

Paula views the amount of homeless people to be a deterrent to her attendance at particular branches. As she stated, "there are a couple of libraries that it is like a homeless camp. And so they take up a lot of desks and stuff." When I asked Paula about her "favorite library of all time" she said it was at USC because it was "really beautiful." Then she continued:

But I think the reason why I liked it the most was that in order to get to the stacks you needed a student ID and you go in and it is row after row of books. It is kind of a little eerie because for French Lit there was nobody there. I used to just go down a row and see what was there...19th century poetry...

I asked her to clarify the feelings behind the fact that you had to swipe your card to get in and she stated with a laugh that she felt, "safer knowing y'know...maybe somebody will know that I'm in here." I then asked about what she thought would happen if the public library asked people to swipe their cards when they walked in and after what I recorded as a long pause she said, "Well I wonder because we have such a big population of um, immigrant [people in Los Angeles] if that would discourage people from going in." Since she feels that libraries are important because they allow for public access I asked if she would be against it and after another long pause she said:

I don't know. Kind of. I don't know in one way it would be good because I'll tell you at Will and Ariel Durant {branch} there is a guard that is there and sits at the door and it is kind of the same feeling. And I'm glad he's there to deal with unruly people. Whatever. (pause) I'd rather have that than to swipe the card.

Paula said that when she moved to Los Angeles ten years ago she visited a nearby library and recalls that, “there were homeless guys all around the opening just kinda camped out. You know it is kinda something you get used to in LA.” She continued: “I went to the stacks in Glendale looking for something and it felt kind of isolated and there was like a homeless guy in every single station...and there was a guy –”HEEY GOOD LOOKIN!’” ...it was just [she laughs a little, seems frustrated, and trails off]. For Celia there is a connection with other people she experiences in the library but she finds there to be a division between her by pointing out that there are, “people drooling in the library [that] aren’t necessarily reading the same books as me.” Ernestine Rose did not use the word homeless in 1954 but rather commented that, “sometimes the library is defined according to one’s social status. Madame does not wish to take books from a public library because she knows that only the poor and unwashed go there” (5). Rose calls this group of people “some of the library’s most devoted patrons” (1954: 5).

Arin Greenwood, the reporter that wrote “D.C. Libraries: Not a Homeless Shelter”, spoke with a homeless lady named Tate who described her reasoning for being in the library in this way: “I come here because it’s a place to get out of the elements [and] rest...there’s a computer so you can advance your skills” (2008). Tate said that she appreciates being in libraries with the other homeless people are “into books, reading...I’d rather come here than loitering in the streets every day, sitting on benches” (2008). Greenwood observed that Tate was sitting amongst her bags and belongings with a newspaper, a dictionary and other books, and in anticipation of a job search she had written her interests on a piece of paper: “liberal

arts, museum studies, antiquities” (2008). In the case of Tate, who is doing things like reading and learning, there is a feeling of acceptance. Issues of levels of legitimacy and status along with discomfort are apparent in the undertone of many comments I came across.

From my research I did not find a geographic or demographic variance in this attitude in the United States. Early on I felt that Los Angeles might be a distinctive place to analyze opinions about shared public space because it is infrequent that a range of socioeconomic residents interact with one another because the metropolitan area has such a low usage public transportation and such a high dependence on their own vehicles. I hold that out as a possibility for thought. One explanation of the standoffishness Americans feel towards homeless people was explained by a library supporter in Washington D.C. who states that there is “compassion” because it is “very sad when they [non-homeless] see people whose lives seem to be so empty” (Greenwood “DC Libraries-Not a Homeless Shelter 2008).

Chip Ward, a former Salt Lake City librarian, wrote a web article called “America Gone Wrong” in which he reports on what I think of as a Don Robert’s style “librarian-hustler” activity. Ward recalls attending “conferences on homeless issues” where he “was always met with puzzlement and the question: ‘What are you doing here?’” to which he would “invariable answer... ‘Where do you think they go during the day?’” (2007). Wards states:

The local shelters push them out onto the streets at six in the morning and, even when the weather is good, they are already lining up by nine, when the library opens, because they want to sit down and recover from the chilly dawn or use the restrooms. Fast-food restaurants, hotel lobbies, office foyers, shopping malls, and other privately owned businesses and properties do not tolerate their presence for long. Public libraries, on the other hand, are open and accessible, tolerant, even inviting and entertaining places

for them to seek refuge from a world that will not abide their often disheveled and odorous presentation, their odd and sometimes obnoxious behaviors, and the awkward challenges they present to those who encounter them. (2007)

Neal Conan of National Public Radio interviewed Ward about the reason why the public library is now, as opposed to thirty years ago, the site for so much of the homeless population. Ward answered:

During the 1980s, when we discovered that a lot of the mental institutions that were holding people were snake pits that were kind of indifferent or inadequate, we started closing them down. And the plan was that those people were supposed to go in the local communities where clinics and facilities and programs would be available. Those plans, however, were not implemented and clinics were not built, and as a result a lot of those people became homeless and marginalized. (“Talk of the Nation—Libraries Become Temporary Refuge for Homeless: 2011)

Ward frames his argument about advocacy for homeless in the library because “this is a social problem, that it belongs to all of us” which provides another way to think about community as it relates to being a shared public place (“Talk of the Nation-Libraries Become Temporary Refuge for Homeless” 2011). Conan reads an email from a listener that states, “sometimes [I] see a homeless guy sitting at the desk muttering nonsense to himself. However, I find this only slightly less annoying than the nicely-dressed guy at the other desk yakking on his cell phone at the top of his lungs” (2011). Ward replies good-naturedly: “the homeless haven't cornered the market on bad behavior. That's for sure” (2011).

There is a discourse of equality in Wards presentation of the subject when he states, “a lot of them have the same concerns that everyone else does. They want to be in a safe, secure environment, and that's one of the reasons they're in the library” (2011). Ward wants to “try to show you [homeless patron] the same respect as anyone else who comes into the library (2011). In the introduction to the book *The*

Politics of Public Space anthropologists Neil Smith and Setha Low explain that the “spatiality of the public sphere potentially transforms our understanding of the politics of the public. An understanding of public space is an imperative for understanding the public sphere” (2006: 6). Homelessness, and sharing space in a library, was an issue impossible to ignore in the course of my research. With the exception of Ted, of whom I purposely asked for his opinion on homelessness, all of my interviews brought it up.

In an article called “Libraries Offer More Services to Homeless” a variety of national strategies towards homelessness are listed including, Internet classes for homeless in Jacksonville, Florida, seminars about health care in Washington D.C., and “a five-day summer camp for homeless children” in Los Angeles (Motsinger 2007). The Dallas Public Library has implemented hygiene rules for patrons but Sanford Berman, founder of a homeless taskforce for the American Library Association (ALA), states, “That kind of rule should be equally applied to a suburban matron doused in perfume” (Motsinger 2007). The issue of status is applicable in this instance as in the previous person that brought up the hypocrisy of kicking out a homeless person for talking to themselves while a person talks on their cell-phone. In American society one allows some room for a businessman in a suit to speak loudly in a public place or an upscale lady to smell of too much perfume.

In an argumentative online reader response to the article Mike states that these programs are, “Just another example of how our government feels entitled to use our tax money for whatever purposes it sees fit. We have hospitals for health care, homeless shelters for homeless and libraries for BOOKS” (2007). In

Washington D.C. a builder is lobbying to tear down the public library branch, and oversee the new construction, because it “is not a homeless shelter” and “we have to build a library that makes it unlikely that the homeless will basically camp there”(Greenwood “Libraries Not a Homeless Shelter” 2008). To Smith and Low, the sharing of “the public sphere” is often the historic site of “intense political struggle” because the definition or understanding of its use is “socially produced” (2006: 7). In fairness the public library was not the focus of the book Smith and Low contributed to and edited. But the authors find that a discussion of the examination of “the politics of public space” is particularly “pivotal” because in the post-September 11th era, “public behavior once seen simply as eccentric, or even protected by First Amendment rights, is now routinely treated as a potential terrorist threat” (2006: 2).

In San Francisco a noteworthy strategy is in use. The public library hired a full time psychiatric social worker in 2009 and started a program the following year that employs homeless people and helps them transition to a more stable life through library employment. The social worker, Leah Esguerra, handles “complaints from staff and patrons about people's behavior” and only calls for police or other security “if things get really ugly” such as “people doing drugs, bathing in the sinks and having sex in the stalls” (Knight “Library Adds Social Worker to Assist Homeless” 2010). Melvin Morris is the first formerly homeless person to have been trained through the library program that now employs him. Morris works 20 hours a week for \$12 an hour “monitoring the restrooms” and “handing out colorful flyers with information on where to find shelters, shower facilities, food and job training

programs” (Knight 2010). Morris states, “I come from the same place they come from,” he said. “When I talk to them, they can't believe I was actually homeless. I tell them they could do it, too” (Knight 2010). This program sounds like a successful attempt at solving a polarizing problem—as a public space homeless people should be welcome but to an institution that compares itself to other branches by their circulation numbers and general business an attempt to encourage patrons of all socioeconomic backgrounds to feel comfortable is paramount concern.

The categorization of “homeless” is “misleading” to Chip Ward who states that homelessness exists in America because, “we have no living wage, no universal healthcare, disintegrating communities, and a large population of working poor who can end up on the street if they lose one of their part-time jobs, experience an illness or an accident, or have a domestic crisis. For them, homelessness is generally temporary” (“America Gone Wrong: A Slashed Safety Net Turns Libraries into Homeless Shelters” 2007). There are at least 200,000 people across the nation living more or less permanently on the street, enough to fill a thousand public libraries every day (“America Gone Wrong: A Slashed Safety Net Turns Libraries into Homeless Shelters” 2007). A national discussion about who belongs continues.

LAPL, Measure L, and the Battle for Funding

World-renowned writer Jorge Luis Borges famously said, “I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.” In LA, Paradise is closed twice a week, in need of new books, and hard up for hired help. In the wake of City Council’s 2010 decision to cut library resources and employees, while simultaneously enforcing LAPL to pay for their own water and power, the city is experiencing a library crisis. To make matters worse, Governor Jerry Brown’s recent budget proposal cuts state funding for public libraries. If the

library is Paradise, consider ours acutely lost. (*Katherine Manderfield "It's Library Lovers Month: Consider the Library" 2011*)

"[U.S.] political democracy is characterized by low voter turn-out, a powerful role of money in the political system, and widespread income, gender, and racial inequality. (Paley 2002: 470)

As a physical building the free public library is a meeting ground that helps to define a community, a safe place that requires no identification to enter, and a storage location for books and digital information. As an idea the free public library is both an embodiment of cultural *ideals* of democracy as well as a place to define, or take the temperature of what is important to that society. The library feels like a stable place that "has always been there" and isn't going anywhere simply because in our lifetimes, and our parents and their parents, it *has* been confidently present. But as an institution the ongoing reliability of the free public library is up for debate. Part of that change has to do with the fact that the collective tax money is the way the library is maintained. Ernestine Rose stated that, "The library is a public institution...supported by people's taxes; and for their own sakes the people should know more about its objectives, problems, and inner workings" (1954: 5). This section combines many of the topics such as democracy and community that have been addressed already.

Since the founding of the LAPL in 1872 the system has grown primarily by community support in the form of taxpayer bonds and funds allocated by elected officials (LAPL "Strategic Plan": 2007). In 2007-2008 The LAPL took in 5.9 million dollars from private donations in addition to the 112 million dollars supplied from taxpayers (LAPL-"About the Library": 2009). How that money should be used, and if

another way of funding the LAPL was possible, was a political issue during the time in which this thesis was written. The LAPL has had severe branch hours cut back as well as being closed two days a week because of a 2010 City Council decision led by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. A group called SaveOurLibrary organized to get LAPL branches reopened using a new funding allocation idea (Measure L) on the ballot for voters to decide in the March 2011 city election⁴⁴.

Spending tax money is at the heart of the problems in Los Angeles. Patrick Range McDonald, in an *LA Weekly* cover story called “City of Airheads,” reports on the ways that the LAPL has failed its citizens. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa:

Executed an unprecedented, and punishing, raid on the libraries. Last spring he convinced the City Council to close the city's central and eight regional libraries on Sundays, then slashed \$22 million from the 2010-11 budget and closed all 73 libraries on Mondays beginning July 19. Library officials say as many as 15,000 youths — plus an untold number of adults — have been turned away every closed day this summer. (2010)

In late 2010 the debate about LAPL funding raged on and Warren Olney, the host of radio program, “Which Way L.A.?” interviewed the Librarian Guild president Roy Stone. Stone said that he tried everything from work furloughs to a hiring freeze to convince the Mayor and Council to keep libraries open at least six days a week (“Which Way L.A.” 2010). Stone states that in 1982 there were 62 branches and 1450 librarian and other branch employees while in 2009 there were eleven

⁴⁴ **Measure L Ballot Wording:** Shall the Charter be amended to incrementally increase the amount the City is required to dedicate annually from its General Fund to the Library Department to an amount equal to .0300% of the assessed value of all property in the City, and incrementally increase the Library Department's responsibility for its direct and indirect costs until it pays for all of its direct and indirect costs, in order to provide Los Angeles neighborhood public libraries with additional funding to help restore library service hours, purchase books and support library programs, subject to audits, using existing funds with no new taxes?
(http://ballotpedia.org/wiki/index.php/Los_Angeles_Reassignment_of_Funds_for_Library_System,_Measure_L_%28March_2011%29)

additional branches but 318 less employees. In 2010 there are still 73 branches but only 850 employees. The numbers stated by Stone beg the question: when a city/society whittles down the numbers of librarians, the “merchant[s] of ideas” (Rose 1954: viii), the people that “play an heroic role in the preservation of our civilization” (vii), how important is the institution to which they serve?

Measure L was designed to get the LAPL back to where it was when Villaraigosa pulled the funding from the library in order to close it five days a week. In another set of two response to the LA Weekly story “City of Airheads” I found this from Kathi:

Vote these guys out! Speaking as a New Yorker with lots of experience with Mayor Bloomberg, this was an eye-opening story about your LA Mayor Villaraigosa. He's the highest paid mayor in the nation?! His council votes in lockstep?! Don't despair, don't get numb, good people, get active! GET RID OF 'EM! YOU GOT THE POWER! USE IT!

And this from Michele:

Wealthy people don't need libraries or their services, they either have their own, or use the ones at their ivy league universities. The mere 97 comments on this article evidences the utter disinterest of most angelenos, we just aren't willing to fight losers like Villaraigosa over the importance of our libraries.. who elected this bird-brain anyway? There's plenty of 'fat' in the mayor's budget, mostly on his own @ss.

Los Angeles City Councilmember Tom LaBonge explains that the “city charter sets aside .0175 percent of the general fund dollars to the library department. That percentage was determined in 1925, when there were 30 libraries operated by the City of Los Angeles” (2010). Measure L was set up to make an increase to that amount. LaBonge explained that, “just a .0125 percent increase to .0300 will make a world of difference to the city’s 73 libraries” (2010). According to a Measure L fact

sheet made available by the LAPL the “new funding could be available as early as July 2011” (2011). In the editorial “Vote No on Measure L” the LA Times countered LaBonge and the Measure L supporters by calling it a “bad solution to a difficult problem” and that “given how small the library's budget is in comparison to the \$4.3-billion general fund, the mayor and 13 council members who endorsed Measure L should be able to find a way to meet the library system's needs without being forced to do so by a charter amendment” (2011). But the article also states that the public library helps to, “make literate Americans out of rich residents as well as poor ones. In L.A., they are the largest provider of after-school programs, keeping kids off the streets and providing computers and Internet access to those who cannot afford them. We would like to see them well funded and open as close to 24/7 as possible” (“Vote No on Measure L” 2011).

Los Angeles has joined the, “dying city of Detroit as the only significant U.S. municipality to close down its entire library system twice weekly — a choice Detroit leaders made during the early-1980s recession, and from which its cultural core seems never to have recovered” (McDonald 2010). In the entire history of the LAPL this is the first time service has been cut to 5 days a week (Measure L Fact Sheet: 2011). McDonald points out that Mayor Villaraigosa, along with the city council members that voted with him, rallied to close the branches on Mondays because they had “cut the fat” from every other part of the city budget. But Villaraigosa, “will spend \$7.7 million on his personal staff salaries, nearly enough to reopen all 73 city libraries on Mondays” (McDonald 2010). Measure L was an attempt to infuse the

LAPL with enough money to reopen on Mondays. Los Angeles City librarian Martin Gomez employs a Carnegie-like sentiment in his belief about patrons:

The educational needs of its citizens, whether they are formal students in public or private school, or they are people who are engaged in lifelong learning or kind of retraining themselves because they're out of jobs or putting job applications in ... the public library has a role, a very significant role, in helping the community become better educated. (McDonald 2010)

McDonald reports that, "Some Angelenos may think Gomez is simply defending an outdated, soon-to-be-extinct institution, with its jammed bookshelves of hardcover books and packed archives of magazines and newspapers." McDonald points to the increased use of libraries in Los Angeles by stating that patronage "jumped from 16 million in 2007 to 16.6 million in 2008 and 17 million in 2009. In a city of 4 million, there's a major demand not just for free books to read but for free wireless and Internet access" (2010).⁴⁵ In my opinion the institution is being chipped away if it isn't being protected but it is a tough sell to a financially strapped city. One month before the March 8th vote The *Los Angeles Times* published a 2011 editorial called "Vote No on Measure L" in which it is stated, "We love libraries too, and consider them a core part of a city's responsibility" (2011). However by "dedicating more money to the library system without increasing overall city revenues means that other functions of city government will have to receive less" ("Vote No on Measure L" 2011).

In response to the "City of Airheads" article by McDonald there were 97 replies on the LA Weekly website. A person named "Sandy" called the mayor and

⁴⁵ The population of Los Angeles County is closer to 10 million. The city of Los Angeles has slightly over 4 million residents.

City Council “unconscionable” for having “such a disregard for the people of Los Angeles” (LA Weekly.com “City of Airheads-Reader’s Response” 2010). I selected a round of reader responses to highlight the way the flow of the debate quickly moved away from libraries to placing blame for the current political situation on the ethnicity of Mayor Villaraigosa. I chose certain responses over others based on my desire to include sentiments that did not appear in other places in the thesis such as those of the adoring library fans. The responses are in order of how they were published for the purpose of showing the flow of what I think of as a conversation.

Chris:

This is GREAT! I LOVE IT! YOU, LA, voted twice for this fine man we call mayor. Yeah...we're liberal and embrace diversity here in LA. Gotta have a fine Mexican mayor. Hey...he had great qualifications, right. I mean a panel attorney for the ACLU! What could be better?

Now we spend millions on dubious gang intervention programs. That makes sense. Let's reward those who chose not to follow societies rules at the expense of those who want to learn. GREAT IDEA L.A.!

Maybe the LAPL can save some money by laying off the security guards at the downtown Central Library. They really don't do much anyway but sit at the front counter. I go there and see bums on the internet looking at porn, bums eating in the cubicles, and, this I loved, bums bumming each other in the men's restroom! The wife was trying to study there once, and there was a bum, peering between the bookshelf, whacking his pud! But hey...we're so politically correct around here we won't do anything about it.

GREAT JOB L.A.! The loony left dominates city government, and this is what we get. But hey...you voted for them, you got them, now you ENJOY THEM!!

Richard40:

Talk about the ultimate in incompetence for a city government. They have enough time and money for useless boycotts against Arizona, even more useless expenses for various environmental green causes, wasteful mass transit systems, and oversize pensions to please the public employee unions, but can't keep their libraries open.

I'm from Oklahoma City. We dont [sic] spend money on useless leftie causes, but we

do manage to keep out libraries open. Next time the "cultural elites" on both coasts look down their nozes [sic] at the uneducated cultural inferiors in flyover country, they should think about this comparison.

Rob E responds:

Hey Richard, Oklahoma is one of the country's biggest welfare queens. It gets back \$1.36 for every \$1 it pays in federal taxes. California, by contrast, gets \$0.78 back for every \$1 it pays into the treasury. So no wonder you guys have open libraries. You're parasailing off of California.

Melissa:

it's because he's [Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa] mexican, plain and simple. mexicans in large part have no appreciation for books and education, so helping libraries will never be first on his agenda. elect leaders that hold your values and this stuff won't happen. elect lazy, uneducated mexicans and live with the results...

Denise:

The bitter irony if that the illegal invaders are the cause of this issue. The ENORMOUS fortune (paid by the Dreaded Gringo), for their housing, feeding, breeding, medical bills, and the costs of their criminal behavior is sucking up every devalued penny Mexifornia has.

Edward:

It's nice to have public libraries. They are NOT a necessity. For years the only libraries that existed in this country were private. If people want libraries, they will fund a bond issue. They will form an government independent library organization and fund it. The city has only so much income. People should be thankful that LA is striving to live within it's [sic] income, rather practicing unsustainable overspending. Libraries are luxuries, not necessities.

The reason for including these lengthy posts is to think about how public discourse has expanded to online anonymous entries. It isn't impossible but it is hard to imagine a group of strangers having this cantankerous conversation in another setting. Arguably the use of anonymous posts could be dismissible because one doesn't understand the background of the source. In this thesis the use is vital for

the critical voice apparent in reader's willing to take a minute or two and send in their comments.

Olney's show, "Do Libraries Really Matter?," used interviews with patrons as they left a library to highlight the way the community was affected by the closing of branches. A man referred to as "Matthew" said,

I understand uh, y'know the situation we are in...the economy and everything, uh but uh this is the place people need to come for knowledge and that is very important for us as a country. So I was hoping the cut would be somewhere else. Not the library. (2010 "Which Way L.A.?")

A woman named Stephanie stated,

I think it is very sad while I understand the budget constraints. I think That this is an essential service for a large part of the community. And I hate to see money taken from here I'd rather see it taken from administrative salaries and not see it for important services like this. I'd rather see it coming from non-essential services. I consider this an essential service. For a lot of people. And I think for kids. (2010 "Which Way L.A.?")

Both patrons lead with an awareness of economic woes in the city. Matthew's feeling that a library offers a much-needed outlet for "knowledge" because it is "very important for us as a country" rings of some of the same sentiments expressed when the public library was founded 160 years ago. Stephanie's belief that a library is "an essential service" answers the segment's question "Do libraries really matter?" with a resounding yes. Stephanie's statement bridges the span of time between the founding of the public library to the modern era. In the 19th century Henry Ward Beecher, a New York City clergyman, called a library, "not a luxury, but one of the necessities of life" (Murray 180-1). The perception of a public library is, in my estimation, one of stability— it has trustworthily "always" been around. In the Foreword to Ernestine Rose's *The Public Library in American Life* author and adult

education proponent Lyman Bryson stated, “the free public library is not uniquely an American institution, but it is so widely established in our country that we take it for granted” (1954: vii). In my mind what makes the public policy issue of the library such an interesting subject for consideration is that it is complex and simple at the same time. To Kathi and Michelle it is seemingly simple. Getting “rid of ‘em” is a temporary fix to the ongoing issue of budget issues and the library. More hurdles will no doubt appear, with or without Villaraigosa, as recession and spending issues continue.

Marilyn Johnson thinks the United States is “beginning an interesting experiment in democracy” because there are cuts in “public library funds...and in some places, shutting them altogether” (“U.S. Public Libraries: We Lose Them at Our Peril” 2010) The fact that this is happening across the country has “nothing to do with whether the libraries are any good or whether the staff provides useful service to the community” (Johnson “U.S. Public Libraries: We Lose Them at Our Peril” 2010). According to Johnson the largest library in the country, in Queens, N.Y., according to circulation numbers, was named the best system in the United States⁴⁶ while “its budget is due to shrink by a third” (2010). As a publically funded job one third of librarians wouldn’t be missed, “the way we’d miss a third of our firefighters and firehouses, the rationale goes ... but I wonder” (2010).

The *LA Times* article explains their editorial position:

Six years ago, the library system completed a 15-year, \$334-million building program that more than doubled the total library space citywide. Library officials believed they had enough money to manage their vastly expanded facilities, thanks to a provision in the City Charter that dedicated a certain amount of revenue to their

⁴⁶ By *Library Journal*

budget. Then the recession hit and the city, scrambling to close its funding gap, required the library system to gradually assume responsibility for its utility bills, pensions, health benefits and other costs that had been borne by other departments.

In the abstract, cutting library hours seems hard to defend. But what if the alternative is to hire fewer police officers, or to cut gang-intervention efforts, or to make new businesses wait longer for permits, or to close down graffiti-removal programs?

The voters elect a mayor and City Council to make those kinds of choices through a comprehensive annual budget process, adapting their allocations to the city's ever-changing needs and circumstances. Mandatory funding proposals such as Measure L ask voters to make choices about particular programs without knowing how those choices will affect the rest of the budget. That is why The Times opposes them. (2011)

The splintering of city resources is a noteworthy platform since as previously quoted, LAPL librarian Barrere believes the library already serves as a form of “gang-intervention.” A response editorial, also published by the LA Times, soon followed by Eva Mitnick of Venice:

Your editorial mentions the value of the Los Angeles public library system to rich and poor alike, as well as the devastation that it has suffered in the city's budget crisis. It's baffling, then, that you advise a no vote on Measure L, which would amend the charter to raise the amount of revenue dedicated to the library. You say that the City Council and the mayor "should be able to find a way to meet the library system's needs without being forced to do so." That was certainly not the case last year, when the library suffered layoffs and shortened hours. Unless Measure L passes, the situation for L.A. libraries will only get worse. Gandhi said that the greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated. Similarly, the greatness of a society can be judged by how well it supports its public library. Los Angeles needs a strong library. (2011)

A “feeling of responsibility” for the “successes and failures” of the library was a quality Ernestine Rose felt the patrons of a library should have (1954: 6). In a small segment of the population this appears to be true.



Sign at Measure L rally three days before the vote. Photo by author

I am interested in the paradox of the public library system in the United States. On one hand the rhetoric is in place about the importance of a symbolically democratic library to the well being of a city. Meanwhile the practicalities of money get in the way. I think the editorial position of the LA Times stands in as an excellent summary of the tension in the issue of public funding, how it is allocated, and what that says about what is important to a society. What is the nature of the “responsibility” that a city and its institution has to the citizens? Marilyn Johnson, the author of *This Book is Overdue!* finds that, “public officials will tell you they love libraries and are committed to them; they just don't believe they constitute a "core"

service” (“U.S. Public Libraries: We Lose Them at our Peril” 2010). That may be true but the *LA Times* editorial did call the library a “core part” of the “responsibility” of a city while rather meekly relying on hope that the mayor and city council can figure out a way to reopen the doors. Hoisting that “responsibility” back on the shoulders of the same mayor that removed funding from the library clearly shirks off the tough part of defining the role of a library. It seems that to define the public library right now is to point out that what has happened in the past, or what is believed to have happened, may not square with the future. The 160 years of the free public library in the United States has steadfastly included the rhetoric of the institution as one of “the most effective levelers of privilege and avenues of reinvention — one of the great engines of democracy” (Johnson “U.S. Public Libraries: We Lose Them at our Peril” 2010). Marilyn Johnson stated, “sooner or later, we’ll all feel the loss” if we are in a city that hasn’t “preserved their libraries” (2010).

Walking to my voting precinct on March 8th I ran into a new neighbor making the same trip. I asked her which of the issues were the most important to her as a voter and she laughingly responded, “The library...I mean, what are they going to take next, THE ROADS?” Ted told me that even though he uses the library only a few times a month he pays “sales tax thinking that the local community library gets some of that loot - and I am happy about that. The library to me is never a waste of money.”

Measure L passed with 62% of the vote. Low voter turn out, a pattern in American democracy, existed in this election with a 12% city-wide participation. The day after the election I went to Atwater, my local LAPL branch, to check out

some reserved books and told the librarian that I was happy to hear the news. He smiled and said, “us too” with a laugh. He explained that he thought that the new tax distribution would in theory give the libraries more money than before but that he will “believe it when I see it.” At the end of my study I note the imbalance between the ways passionate supporters frame the role of the library as vital and important while so much contention exists in how and why tax payers should continue funding the 160 year old institution.

Epilogue

If we are interested in human behaviour, we need first of all to understand the institutions that are provided in any society. For human behaviour will take the forms those institutions suggest, even to the extremes of which the observer, deeply dyed in the culture of which he is a part, can have no intimation.—Ruth Benedict from *Patterns of Culture* first published in 1934 (236)

One clue about the meaning of the library arose when chatting with a friend who mentioned how much she “loves the library” and that she has been “planning a trip” to her neighborhood branch for two years but “hasn’t found the time” and doesn’t have a library card anymore. I teased her about how she could “love” the library without using it and she referenced the fact that it feels so stable and that she “knows it will always be there for me” based on her fond recollections from spending time as a child at her local branch. There is something substantial in this notion. The public library is not a legally protected resource supported by the Constitution. The institution remains in place because so far American society collectively agrees that it is worthwhile to support. The public library does not always *have to* be there and if support dwindles it may go away. I believe one way for this to happen is if a majority of Americans fail to be able to define for themselves why a public library should be paid for with collective tax money. That could happen with splintering of opinion or increased societal indifference.

The significant role of the library as a place for self-betterment through free information broadened over time to include another important function—as a community center. There has been a retail-like shift in trying to welcome people to enter the space of the library by either providing a café or allowing outside food and drink, as well as a move towards friendlier shelving practices. The current age has

brought public computer terminals, area for laptop users with free Wi-Fi access, and the support of digitally archived materials. The library is trying to be all things to all people— books, computers, e-books, activities, free information, classes, readings, lecture events, a safe place for children, a place for everyone in the community. Thus, the American public library has never shed any of its historically significant roles but absorbed more duties until it now carries a far too heavy load for realistic continuation under the current financial arrangement.

The next phase will undoubtedly be the most complicated. The library is precariously dependent on public support because there isn't a clear reason for its existence and a growing group of people is questioning its role. My interviewees, all library fans, distilled the meaning to "information" but that is the exact reason to not support it according to a recent Fox News program in Chicago called "Are Libraries Necessary, or a Waste of Tax Money?" A Tea Party political group member was interviewed for the show and claimed that the library is another example of big government gone wrong and that cash strapped cities and states should cut library funding or get rid of them since the Internet has replaced the need for information. The counterpoint was made by a librarian who claimed that circulation numbers and visits are up in times of a recession. Although unethical and inconclusive the news program hid cameras in the stacks to try and refute the numbers the library gave for daily visitors. Perhaps future voters will support the third place style café culture or maybe a more radical change will happen. One thing seems certain: that the mythology of the grouchy old maid librarian shushing patrons will forever disappear. Along with books.

In Chapter One I included information about a possible National Digital Library but another outcome, which is underway, is useful to explore the end of my study. My interviewee Ted stated that the importance of a library to society is in part because “it houses all sorts of information. For sure the Internet has taken that information and put it out for the public as well...so in many ways the Internet is also a library of sorts. The Internet is a great thing, but it may not be here forever” He then added that “Google may take over the Internet, which I don't think is a good thing. So the library is the perfect back-up plan for democracy.” I admit I didn't fully grasp what he was saying at the time. Ted, a small press publisher, is acutely aware of the fact that publishing agents, authors, university and public librarians, and the search engine company Google are currently tangled in both a significant legal mess and an ongoing public debate about how books are owned and distributed. I include an overview of this issue as a way of thinking about how book ownership issues may affect and complicate the American library in the future.

Starting in 2005 Google Books has been set up to scan and create accessible digital files and the company has stated the goal of digitally archiving every known book, 130 million, by 2020. The group has scanned 12 million books but the large scale project is held up in court over multiple copyright issues with authors. Google Books currently provides only the texts that are in the public domain or are authorized for distribution. One part of the debate is that large research institutions provided scans of their massive collections to Google Books. The debate complicated and ramped up in 2010 when Google Editions was created because it will be an e-

bookstore that competes with online retailers. According to author and media scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan:

Libraries got used, universities got used. I think the scanning program is one of the biggest examples of corporate welfare from universities in history. Universities collectively spent millions, billions of dollars on their collections, on metadata, and then they just gave it to Google for a profit-making venture. It's astounding. And librarians have put in so many labor hours doing Google's work that it actually ended up being really expensive for a lot of them. (Albanese 2011)

To Vaidhyanathan supporters of a digital library make two incorrect assumptions, that the cost will be low and that Google is the only group powerful enough to effectively digitalize books. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly* about his book *The Googlization of Everything* Vaidhyanathan was asked if there is validity to a “project [that] offers great public benefits, making millions of long-lost books discoverable and accessible, work libraries could never have done so expeditiously” to which he responded:

Google wants to be a bookstore, not a library...the premise that no one else was ever going to do this is an argument by fiat, a classic fallacy. If we, the people of the world, the librarians of the world, the scholars of the world, the publishers of the world, decide that we should have a universal digital library, then let's write a plan, change the laws, raise money, and do it right. If we're going to create this with public resources, let's do it in the public interest, not corporate interest...Google figures that if it creates good products and they get popular, the courts and Congress will be less likely to undo them. But that is an arrogant, audacious perspective on the legal and legislative system, and it's fundamentally antidemocratic. (Albanese 2011)

The interviewer referenced the Google Books supporter Paul Courant, a University of Michigan librarian, who knows Vaidhyanathan professionally. Courant responds directly to the interview on his blog:

First, my support for the project is not based on an assumption that the cost to university libraries would be low, but rather on a calculation that the costs are and have been substantially less than the benefits...[second] I don't quite see the fallacy. Just who, other than Google, has been willing to step up and do the job? And in what

pre-Google fantasyland might we have expected the publishers of the world to show interest in making their backlists part of a universal digital library? (“Benefits, Costs, and Googleization: A Comment on Siva Vaidhyanathan” 2011)

The debate continues with a tax supported National Digital Library being conceptualized while Google Books, a for profit venture, is partially held back by lawsuits that may set a legal precedent for American copyright issues. Google Books is not fully accessible worldwide, in France for example, because of stricter copyright laws.

David Lewis wrote an essay called “The User-Driven Purchase Give Away Library: A Thought Experiment” in which he proposes that libraries cease all collecting and cataloguing of material and only acquire it upon a patron’s request. The patron would be allowed to keep the “book” which would be printed for them. Lewis calls the idea a “radical alternative” that would rely on an “Espresso Book Machine” (2010). I took that to be figure of speech but the Espresso Book Machine (EBM) is an actual piece of equipment that prints and binds up to two 550-page paperbacks every seven minutes. The EBM website calls the machine an “ATM for books” and “the completed library-quality paperback book is presented spine first by the EBM – still warm – ready to read” (2011).

I went to see an EBM in an independent bookstore called Flintridge Books near Pasadena. It looks precisely like what it is— a copy machine that happens to be sitting next to a glass enclosed jumble of robotic moving parts. There is a laptop sized monitor on one end and a chute for books to drop from once completed. According to the EBM website it costs \$50,000. Twenty-one exist in the United

States according to the EBM website and are found primarily in University bookstores.



The Espresso Book Machine—“What Gutenberg’s press did for Europe in the 15th century, digitization and the Espresso Book Machine can do for the world...today!”—brochure made available at Flintridge Books Photo by author.

I asked one of the employees how it has been going since getting the EBM in February and she smiled and said that people are still figuring out how they will use it but they have a part-time worker that comes in and helps customers understand how the process could work for them. Her favorite day was when a Girl Scout troop came in and excitedly waited while fifty copies of a book they created were assembled. I told her that libraries might someday offer the ESB machine for books in the public domain and she replied, “Oh yeah, we can do that too.” We looked up

the first book that came to my mind, *Pride and Prejudice*, and a copy could be made for \$6.99. *Annoyed Librarian* stated in a 2010 post called “Libraries Giving Away Books, or Not” that using the EBM would “be lovely for the 10% of library patrons who want to read 85+ year old books” but that in ten years “books still under copyright (i.e. the vast majority of what people actually want to read), will be available digitally.”

Referring to the Lewis article *Annoyed Librarian* stated, “I’m not sure whether to laugh or cry...It all sounds very pretty, and it certainly shows some imagination on the part of the author.” *Annoyed Librarian* comments further on the “information dystopia” that would be created by the transference of literary control to publishers:

The traditional role librarians have played in making information more available to researchers will be eliminated. Bigger libraries will have most available books. Smaller libraries can have small packages the publishers decide would be good for their clientele. Librarians live in a la la land where if information is digitized it thus becomes more available to people. Theoretically, that’s true. Once digitized, everyone in the world could theoretically read the same book at the same time for practically nothing. It turns out that libraries don’t control that digitized information, though, and the more digital information there is the more it will be controlled and restrained by publishers and copyright laws and digital rights. Libraries will just be there to pay exorbitant costs for books that individuals can’t afford, the same as they now do for journals. Librarians want to make information free. Publishers want to make information pay. Which group do you think will win?

One of *Annoyed Librarian’s* readers responded that “Librarians will win once they realize that Capitalism is antithetical to the right of access to information.” As *Annoyed Librarian* points out the concept of Google Books does seem to make reading material more accessible but the control of the material may be slipping away from a patron-friendly middle man—the librarian.

Another issue about the digitization of books is revealed on the blog *Tech Broiler* by Jason Perlow who wrote a 2010 post called “Digital Underclass: What Happens When the Libraries Die?” One of the most impassioned and elongated reader response chains I came across in my research followed the post.

Perlow takes issue with the “sociological impact that many have not considered — which is that the “Have Nots” of society may find themselves denied access to an entire range of content they enjoyed previously with the printed book, newspaper or magazine” (2010). Perlow thinks that “in a fully digital society, we won’t need Public Libraries anymore” because “they won’t be cost effective” (2010). He continues:

In the last several hundred years, Public Libraries have been a cornerstone of having a literate society, and it’s something that many consider to be a basic human right — free access to books and information, paid by the state and local governments from our collective tax dollars. In contrast, most e-Book and digital media consumption requires a personal outlay of funds... While there are limited e-book lending programs in place with DRM-enabled EPUB files for the Nook and the SONY readers, and there is a certain amount of free e-book content available, that material is in the minority. So if you want to be able to read e-books, you need to possess a certain amount of technology and/or capital as an individual. This is not the case with public libraries. At a Public Library, you walk in and read what you want, for as long as you like, for free, because you pay state and local taxes that fund their operation. To check that material out of the library on loan, you typically only need to prove residency for that town, city, or county. No technology is required, although at bare minimum, you might need some paid transportation to get to a library, depending on how far you live from one. In a digital society where almost all books and written media are electronic, the Public Library needs to be rebooted, especially if as a society we are to continue the tradition of providing free access to books and periodicals. It means that we need to guarantee that citizens have access, even if they are poor. It means each citizen needs access to free bandwidth to get books and they need devices to read the material on. We can assume that everyone in 10 years will be able to afford a smartphone or a super-inexpensive tablet device with inexpensive Internet connectivity, but that’s an awful big assumption. (Perlow 2010)

Perlow ends his long post with the question, “Are we creating a new “Digital Underclass” with the elimination of printed media?” and the request to “**Talk Back and Let Me know**”⁴⁷ (2010). The reader responses on this blog hit almost every point I made in my thesis about how Americans discuss the role of the public library. I grouped the responses by topics and in some cases broke up lengthy posts by one person in to two or more areas.

The first chronological responses could be purely sarcastic, in particular the first, but since this is an anonymous forum it is hard to gauge effectively:

Robin:

I used to support public libraries but now that I am a registered Republican and tea-wagger my eyes have been opened and I see them as the giveaway they are. Universal literacy and Internet access are for countries like Cuba, not the USA.

Frgough:

Donations (go look it up). That's because liberals steal other people's money via the power of the state, give it to some corrupt bureaucrat to buy votes, then pat themselves on the back thinking they've actually done something positive for society. Then blame conservatives when liberal-run cities like Detroit and NYC become cesspools of crime, poverty and human misery.

The issue of political positioning came up in three posts:

Snark Shark:

Thank god you've written this, Jason. Somebody HAD to. And personally I will call "*****" on all of the folks who will try and make this into a Conservative/Liberal Republican/Democrat issue. Bull. ****. This isn't about giving hand-outs to poor people and debating if they're slacking off work. This is protecting something which has helped define and differentiate our country from "the Old World" since Mr. Franklin and his contemporaries kicked around the idea in the 1730s. Access to books and reference materials may not technically be a "right" as an American, but its damned close.

⁴⁷ Bold in original post

Jeff Dickey:

Our country hasn't been this polarized since 1860. You're either with the teabaggers or you're called a "socialist;" too frequently, both at the same time. The great middle, which built not only America but most of what we consider "Western civilization," is disappearing faster than the libraries which they championed, and which you rightly mourn.

Jcmolette in response to Jeff Dickey:

I couldn't agree more! The USA is the new Rome. Our civilization (and civility) is crumbling but we can't see the forest because of the trees.

AmicaLola summed up the role of American voters: "The library is funded by taxpayers, not "government." That is clear. It isn't a "right", it is a public service. If the voters (note that this is more inclusive than taxpayers!) decide to eliminate Library funding -- so be it."

Several readers claimed the use of digital archiving to be problematic because of potential preservation issues:

Bclainheart:

We see how links degrade over time and how things that you might have even put on the web yourself become hard to find after a while. Digital preservation is extremely important for large-scale digital libraries.

AmicaLola:

But there is a larger issue that plagues our digital future -- IMPERMANENCE. We already have issues in that area of digital. Anyone acquainted with Orwell's 1984 and the Ministry of Truth can see a serious flaw in the effortless mutability of digital signals used to record our "news" and "history." I have returned to news articles a couple months later to find them "different" (subtle -- but edits occurred) than the original with no note indicating a change. (Most do indicate; /some/ don't.) Digital storage of history assumes honest people -- that's a problem. Political/Gov't abuse of news/history ought to scare us.

Grant:

Another concern is the longevity of digital information. How many people can ready [sic] paper from 250 years ago? Most. How many can read digital data from 25 years ago? Almost none. Just try to read a floppy from a Commodore 64 today.

Mwagner, responding to Grant:

...had information of value to its creator on it, it would have long since been moved to a modern hard drive. I'd bet that, like that Commodore 64 floppy, most of the books published 250 years ago are long gone - and those that survive are either in a museum or digitized - or both.

According to Mwagner, the original “creator” must decide the value of the material and update the information to the next technology. That is complicated for individuals much less for a public institution because one doesn’t always comprehend the value of a book, image or article until time has passed. As quoted in Chapter One, the Boston Public Library included in their charter the necessity for, “*Books that few persons will wish to read, and of which, therefore, only one copy will be kept*”⁴⁸ (Basbanes 2003: 364). The notion of saving one copy is already being challenged by the large-scale weeding of books by public and private libraries. But historically vital or just plain interesting material could truly be lost forever if a one-time value is put on it about whether or not to digitally archive.⁴⁹

The following three readers address the issue of ownership:

Monkeypox:

It will take a lot longer than 10 years to phase out print. And when that day comes, there will still be huge collections that will take a generation or two to get rid of, if ever. Local ownership is huge when you see a few entites [sic] controlling more and more information. Google books might be free now, but that could change whenever they decide they want to.

⁴⁸ Italics used in original document.

⁴⁹ By way of a comparison to books I spoke with Sarah, a friend of mine who oversees a commercial digital photography archive, and I asked her about what happens to the images that are sent by the artists but not selected by her editorial staff: “They are just kind of...gone, they disappear.” She told me that the far larger issues are about the expense of server space as well as the serious possibility of a crash which are both “big problems for archivists” of any kind. Sarah says most companies have “two or three copies [of their archives] on different servers in completely different locations...for us we have 100,000 digital images in the office [Manhattan], and upstate New York and Denmark.” Each server must be updated at the same precise time to avoid any discrepancies.

AmicaLola:

Jason [Perlow] considered the other issue of "who owns the digital text?" If music is a guide, we will someday pay a subscription fee to a digital vault that holds eTexts and we will download them on-demand. (a la Pandora or an on-demand iTunes)
You'll never 'own' the book. That could get interesting in a hurry.
eBooks & e-history are convenient -- but they still look dangerous to me when they become the /only/ ones that exist.

SnarkShark:

A lot of people are gonna whine about how ebook loaning is going to take money out of author's mouths. Well, sure. But Libraries have been doing that for a long time and where were the complaints then?

The tension between books and computers:

Bill Anderson:

Books and libraries are not going to go away any time soon because most people enjoy sitting down in peace and quiet to read a good book, heaven forbid that you guys were ever right and our only choice was a digital reader of some kind. Looking at a screen is worse for your eyes than reading an actual book and you can feel the difference when you've been working at a PC for some time. You don't feel relaxed like you would with a book and instead your eyes are tired and strained. So stop with the marketeering and BS because we will have books to read for quite some time to come. Real readers will not have it any other way.

Chaz,Broam:

Okay, first thing people: If printed books disappear, then you will see me buying them up in HUGE quantities. You don't need anything but two arms, at least one good eye, a couple of thumbs and a few fingers to read a printed book or magazine. You need all sorts of electronic doo-dads to read your effing e-books. If this nation does away with it's own share of printed media, it does away with the very thing that made it free: the free printing press! The written word IS mightier than the sword. Even if I am homeless, I WILL have my printed media. You will have to pry them from my cold dead fingers.

Libraries as community centers:

MetejaMiljacki:

Let's not forget that libraries are not just about books, or just about journals. They are not just accessible repositories but also space (physical and virtual) connecting local communities...There is also the question of localization in a global economy. I think that is really where the danger of digital divide is, in that it is at times more than just digital, rather, it is a cultural divide. On one side of the divide are

empowered consumers driving innovation with content that empowered users consume and create...On the other are for one reason or the other, disempowered users of the same content and hence given no chance to innovate within their own culture. They simply must wait for global publishers to think about them, which looks unlikely as long as publishers are primarily motivated by profits. This is not something a traditional library is guided by, but the content they provide access to increasingly is. Purely academic libraries are hopefully different in this aspect, but public libraries still have a distinct function of serving a local community.

Kmiller8:

Ah, libraries aren't about the content IN them, they are about education. Remember "story hour", which is really -- early literacy hour? There will be a place called a library, but it won't have (only) paper books in it. There will be the things that are there now (early literacy hour, homework help, computer/technology classes, digital literacy classes, community education programming, etc etc.) AND it will be about any of the new "stuff" that comes along.

Snark Shark responds to Kmiller8:

That kind of seems to be part of the point of this article, I think. The library needs to change, and part of that is inevitable going to be a recognition that the rent and maintenance on the actual physical building may be causing a problem in a lot of places. Some towns will manage to morph them into little community centers, but others can't, or won't, and even those who do will face bureaucratic bumbling and vote jockeying for funding... and many will lose. The absence of actual physical books which inevitably is going to happen will simply fuel the fire of what's already happening simply because of a lack of funding. All the cheerleading "Go Libraries" stuff in the world isn't going to change the fact that its [sic] the RICH communities people are chiming in about with "hey, my library is doing better than ever!" Not the economically challenged communities... where the doors are simply getting harder and harder to keep open.

Monkeypox:

People use my public library for readings, art events, kid programs, and a host of other activities. This has nothing to do with collections, and is a central part of their mission.

Gvex:

I totally reject the premise that libraries MUST go digital. Libraries are a great benefit that an organization or locality chooses to provide to a community. But every library (public or private) has limits as to what it offers...Although it sounds high and mighty, it's a mistake to think of libraries as a "basic human right" or that a library must serve every whim and...desire of everyone in the community.

Ideas about the future:

AmicaLola:

Private Libraries w/ subscriptions and memberships will pop up. IF libraries close, there will be sufficient demand in larger cities for Private Libraries with REAL BOOKS. They may even get started by a local investor buying the remnants of the closing Public Library. (I, for one, would be an early subscriber.) No library contains EVERYTHING -- choices are made based on budget and space.

Kmiller8:

Libraries and librarians change with the times. Libraries are about education, transformation, and _possibilities_.

MetejaMiljacki:

I think as we go forward, libraries have to re-invent themselves as collaborative spaces, showcases, event and content experts partnering with education, with the innovation being guided by the medium of expression and creation versus consumption...There is a glimmer of hope among some educators that library is not dead, but needs to be reinvented. We must be careful how that is done, careful looking at what purpose they serve as institutions of education and innovate on that. If we sit in sorrow and reminisce of the good old library days, we are not focusing on the future and are adding more baggage to the pile guiding failing education. Let's look at the digital book as an opportunity to do something different.

Snark Shark:

The actual buildings may have to close. But the IDEA needs to be kept alive, even if digitally. Basic access to that material needs to be free (by necessity that would include the way to access the information too, since getting Internet ain't exactly the same as walking a few blocks to the Library, or even forking over a buck to hop on a bus).

Perlow and the reader's comments to his post were useful as an example of what librarian Gordon McShean wrote about libraries being defined largely due to their "people-ishness" because "what are books and libraries for if not people?" (1977:17). The long passages from this blog and its reader responses gives a strong sense of the answer to the question, What is important about a public library? What is useful about the current debate about the responsibility of the library to taxpayers is that it proves how institutions are socially reproduced.

Democracy, always shifting in definition in every place, and over time, clearly includes the concept of possibility through societal discourse. The institution of the public library is at a crossroads, partially because of the change from the original function of education to the masses and free information as a right for democratic citizens to something far broader. The future public library is going to be affected by the use of money, publishing access, and large-scale control in a way that was unthinkable during the early years. At the end of this thesis what I can surmise is that the public library “means” is that it is a peerless place, not because of what it has been, but because it is uniquely abundant with possibility as the site of an ongoing American conversation about what the familiar old institution *could* become.

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